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## **HOW TO WRITE A PLAY**

*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

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# HOW TO WRITE A PLAY

BY

ST JOHN ERVINE

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**TO**

**ROBERT BELL**

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# HOW TO WRITE A PLAY



## HOW TO WRITE A PLAY.

### I

THE title of this book is entirely catchpenny. Neither I nor anyone else can tell the reader how to write a play in terms so exact that, after a course of, say, twelve lessons for twelve guineas, he or she may sit down with some confidence to produce masterpieces. There is a fallacious, but widely held, belief that most things can be accomplished after instructions; and advertisements are frequently to be found in the newspapers, in which the advertisers offer to turn incompetent persons into efficient journalists, artists, or authors by means of a correspondence course. The instructors appear to do very well out of their pupils, for the fees demanded for the instruction are not small, but I doubt if many of the pupils do well out of the instructors. Several years ago I received a letter from a young man in the Middle West of America who was ambitious to be a journalist and had taken a correspondence course at a "college" in New York. He had paid a large fee to the professor in charge of it, and, in return for this fee, was to be taught in twenty lessons, delivered by post, how to take over the edi-

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torial control of the *New York World*. At the end of the seventh lesson he had begun to doubt the professor's ability to instruct him in anything, and he therefore decided to test him by a trick. He copied an article of mine, which had been printed in the English *Observer* and the American *Vanity Fair*, and sent it to the professor as a specimen of his own unaided work. The criticism it received was devastating! Never in the professor's life had he read such twaddle, or seen words so vilely put together. If the young man could not improve upon that sorry stuff, he had better abandon all hope of becoming a journalist and content himself with the hoeing of turnips! What made him imagine that any editor anywhere in the world would print such trash? . . . The young man then informed the professor of the trick that had been played upon him, and added that my article had been printed in an American magazine and an English newspaper! That, apparently, finished the professor, and it nearly finished me, for I feared that the professor had detected his pupil's trick and was delivering a just judgment on my work. Had I been he, I should certainly have said so.

A similar story could probably be repeated out of their own experience by many persons who have taken a course of instruction in authorship. Several years ago a book was published in England with some such title as *How to Succeed in Literature*. A few months after it was published its author committed suicide because [2]

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he had been unable to succeed in literature. This offer, then, to instruct people in work which is essentially an expression of personality and is not describable in precise terms nor capable of being reduced to a formula, amounts almost to a fraud. Any professor can expose the works of *Æschylus*, *Sophocles*, *Euripides*, *Aristophanes*, *Terence*, *Racine*, *Shakespeare*, *Molière*, *Sheridan*, *Ibsen*, *Strindberg*, *Chekhov*, and *Shaw*, and show his students how shockingly they are constructed. There was, indeed, a professor at Columbia University who delighted to tell his pupils that, so far as technique was concerned, he could write plays as good as *Shakespeare's*. All that is easy. There is only one thing which the professor cannot do with the plays of the world's great dramatists: write them. I do not propose, therefore, in this book to tell the reader how to become a successful dramatist; for, if I knew that secret, I should become one myself. All that I propose to do is to state some elementary facts about dramatic craftsmanship, and I will illustrate my statements by examples drawn from the works of established authors. I think it well, however, to repeat that no human being can tell any other human being how to become an author. If the reader has no ability to write plays when he starts to read this book, he will not have any ability to write them when he puts it down. He will, I hope, have some understanding of the difficulty of the craft and a little knowledge of various devices which are exploited in it, but he must

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not expect to have any more than that. He might as reasonably expect to be able to build a world after reading the book of Genesis, as expect to be able to write a play after reading a manual on play-making.

## II

Books of instruction in play-making have been written by many learned people, nearly all of whom have totally failed to write plays at all, or, having written plays according to their own rules and regulations, have achieved calamitous failures. Mr Bernard Shaw asserts that “those who can, do: those who can’t, teach”; and Sir James Barrie, perhaps the finest craftsman that has ever written for the stage, says in his preface to a volume of *The Comedies of Harold Chapin*, that he once “cautiously bought a book about how to write plays . . . in order to see whether Mr Chapin wrote his properly. But the book was so learned, and the author knew so much, and the subject when studied grew so difficult, that I hurriedly abandoned my enquiry.” That is commonly the attitude of authors towards professors. Two very admirable books on stage-craft have been written, one by an American—Professor George P. Baker, formerly of Harvard and now of Yale University—and one by a Scotsman—the late William Archer. Baker’s book is entitled *Dramatic Technique*; Archer’s is entitled *Play Making*. Professor Baker has unusual qualifications for instructing young authors in the technique of the the-

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atre. He founded a school at Harvard<sup>1</sup> in which students were instructed in the whole business of the theatre, from scene-shifting to acting and play-writing. Several volumes, mostly of short plays written by his students, have been published; and they are all distinguished by technical excellence. The wheels go round, but that is all that they do. Two well-known and notable dramatists have passed through Professor Baker's studio: Mr Edward Sheldon, who, while still an undergraduate, wrote a play called *Salvation Nell*, which ran for a long time in New York; and Mr Eugene O'Neill, the most eminent dramatist that America has yet produced. Mr Sheldon is known in this country through his play *Romance*, which was very successfully performed in London and toured in the provinces by Miss Doris Keane. It is an excellent example of a very skilfully contrived play. Mr O'Neill's work now needs no advertisement in England. It is familiar to all who are acquainted with the modern theatre. I mention these authors, so to speak, as credentials for Professor Baker, although I am bound to say that Mr O'Neill has broken almost all the rules that he was taught by his preceptor. William Archer had several qualifications for instructing students in stage-craft. He was a dramatic critic of long and wide experience; he translated many of the plays of Ibsen—a great craftsman—into English; and he was himself the author of a number of plays, one of which, *The*

<sup>1</sup> He now conducts a similar school at Yale.

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*Green Goddess*, was a great popular success in England and in America.

It would seem that both these teachers, Professor Baker and William Archer, would command the respect of all dramatists in their capacity as instructors in stage-craft, but the facts are otherwise. I have never met any dramatist who did not deride their books. I have heard Mr Bernard Shaw and Mr Somerset Maugham assert that *Dramatic Technique* and *Play Making* are actually harmful to aspiring authors. They under-estimated the worth of them; but their main point is indisputable, that all authors finally invent their own technique and teach themselves how to write. It is doubtful whether any author in the world has ever been "helped" by criticism in the sense that it has taught him how to do his work. No author has acquired the ability to write plays or anything else through professional instruction. William Archer had unlimited faith in rules and regulations, but his one successful piece, *The Green Goddess*, was the result, not of a rational process—he was a great rationalist—but of a dream. Wildly, irrationally, incalculably, the story of *The Green Goddess* was delivered to his mind while he was asleep; and out of that barefaced denial of all his beliefs came his single success.

If the aspirant to authorship has not got the elusive instinct for the theatre, which no one can define or adequately describe, he had better abandon all hope of becoming a dramatist; for no person, however skil-

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ful, can explain this mystery to him so that he can perform it. Any reasonably intelligent person can be turned into a competent apothecary or lawyer or surgeon by a careful study of the authorities and textbooks, but no reasonably intelligent person can be turned into a competent author by the same process. There is a widely believed lie that every man has in him at least one book. That, perhaps, is why so many tedious volumes are yearly inflicted upon the public. This lie would not be so disastrous in its results if those who believe in it were to restrict themselves to the authorship of a single book, but, alas, they do not. Infatuated with the belief that they can understand themselves sufficiently well to make a story out of their lives, they begin to believe that they can understand other persons as easily; and so, until death cancels them, they continue to spin out of the thin stuff of their experience thinner and thinner replicas of their first book.

### III

THE fascinating fact about writing of any kind is that while able, clever, well-informed, and highly instructed persons, fully familiar with the rules of the craft, may not be able to follow them and are incapable of producing any work that is meritorious, other persons who are not well-informed or highly instructed, or even aware that there are any rules to break, produce masterpieces. Oliver Goldsmith was not such a noodle as David Garrick and James Boswell imagined, but neither was he such a scholar as Dr Johnson was, yet he wrote better stuff than any of them and could almost casually compose lines as lovely as these:

Along thy glades, a solitary guest,  
The hollow-sounding bittern guards its nest,

whereas Dr Johnson, no matter how much thought he took, could neither compose a poem nor a play that was pleasing. These are lines that helped, no doubt, to evoke boos from the audience which listened to the first performance of *Irene* at Drury Lane:

I thought, forgive my fair, the noblest aim,  
The strongest effort of a female soul  
Was but to choose the graces of the day,

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To tune the tongue, to teach the eyes to roll,  
Dispose the colours of the flowing robe,  
And add new roses to the faded cheek.

When the Duchess of Atholl, objecting to an extension of the franchise, scornfully remarked that, were it made, tinkers might be enabled to vote, she had forgotten that one of the tribe, named Bunyan, enriched the literature of this land with the finest religious allegory we possess. Dukes, despite their advantages of fortune and skilled instruction, have unaccountably omitted to make any masterpieces.

A man, who has all the faults against which the professors warn the students of drama, may write plays that are great and profoundly moving in their effect on audiences; and it would be possible to illustrate a volume of faults in construction of plays from the works of Shakespeare, whose offence, in the eyes of Baconians, seems to be that he was not educated at Oxford or Cambridge and was not related to a lord. A professor of dramatic theory might make a long list of flaws to be found in the plays of Mr Sean O'Casey, the Irish dramatist, which ought to abash Mr O'Casey, and even deter him from attempting to write plays at all. Yet, amazingly, Mr O'Casey has written *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, and deeply stirred audiences which witnessed their performance. His plays are not limited in their appeal to the emotional or the simple-minded or the slightly educated: they appeal to every class and

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to every sort of mind, to the intellectual and to the emotional, to the simple and to the complex, to the lowbrow and the highbrow. That is the astounding and delightful fact about creative art, that anybody, whatever his condition and education may be, can practise it; yet no one, because he has been fortunate in his birth or his instruction, can be certain of success in it. Marlowe and Ben Jonson were university men: Shakespeare was a pupil at a grammar school. The first two produced plays that are notable, but the third wrote masterpieces. Logic and learning are not essential to dramatists or poets or novelists. What riled the university wits with Shakespeare was, not that he could write plays, but that they, with all the learning of Cambridge behind them, could not accomplish the job with a tenth of the ability of a tradesman's son who was educated in a common grammar school. But Keats was none the worse for the fact that he entered an apothecary's shop at an age when Robert Southey was still at Westminster and thinking of going up to Balliol. It was not a serious disadvantage to Dickens that he never went to a university. It is arguable, although I would not support the argument, that Shakespeare and Keats and Dickens might have suffered irreparable injury at Oxford, and that Marlowe might have been a more sober and less quarrelsome man, and have lived longer and written more, if he had never been to Cambridge. Mr Sean O'Casey for the greater part of his life lived in a Dublin slum and

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earned his livelihood by working as a plasterer's labourer. His wages can rarely have been more than twenty-five or thirty shillings per week. When he was twelve years of age, he still had not learned how to read or write. His education, when he got any, was the meagre one given in an Irish National School, and he received it only for two or three years. Compared with Mr O'Casey, Shakespeare had the education of a professor. Whatever Mr O'Casey knows he has learned for himself. His sight is weak and he may be said to be half-blind, but he has used his weak eyes far more effectively than the majority of us use eyes that are perfect. He is a brilliant example of the assertion that a man who has an instinct for the theatre can overcome what appear to be inseparable difficulties and write plays that will impress themselves upon the memory of the most diverse people. Example after example of his sort might be cited to show that nothing on earth can prevent a man from becoming a dramatist if he has the spark in him which is called the instinct for the drama; and melancholy examples might also be cited of men, who, with every advantage that fortune and instruction can give them, are yet utterly unable to write plays of any worth.

The man who aspires to be a dramatist must first search his heart—not his mind—to see whether the instinct for the theatre is there. If it is not, he had better turn his attention to other forms of writing. He may waste precious years in struggling with a form

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which is not his: writing plays when he should be writing novels or essays or biography, or in attempting to write at all when heaven intended him to be a gifted actuary or a brilliant sugar-refiner or a first-class corn-chandler. Of all the forms of writing, there is probably none—not even the poetic form—which is so difficult to use, as the dramatic form. It imposes restraints upon the author which are not imposed upon him by any other method of expression. The sculptor goes directly to his stone, and the painter to his canvas; but the dramatist cannot go directly to his play. He has to ask for the assistance of actors and scenic-artists and producers. He is more dependent upon the audience than the novelist is upon the reader. He is compelled to practise an economy in words that is almost miserly. The novelist can use whatever number of words he pleases: sixty thousand or two hundred and fifty thousand; but the dramatist must not use more than thirty thousand, and uses that number only at his peril. The average play has not got as many words in it as are to be found in a long short-story, yet it has to contain as much substance as is to be found in a full-length novel. The dramatist is affected by social customs which do not press upon any other writer. His play must be of such a length that it can be witnessed in comfort after an evening meal, and before the departure of the last train or tram. The high cost of production makes publishers regard very long novels with disapproval; but it does not make them

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forbid authors to write long novels. It does, in a very definite sense, limit the range of the dramatist, who is obliged to remember that a play with a long cast and frequent changes of scene—especially if its author be unknown, or little known, or unsuccessful—will not be produced at all. Miss Clemence Dane has written a play, called *Naboth's Vineyard*, which can only be effectively performed in Drury Lane. It has not yet been performed there, or anywhere, because the expense of putting it on the stage to-day would be very great.



## I V

MENTION has several times been made of the instinct for the theatre without which plays cannot be written, and the reader is now probably preparing to demand a definition of this instinct. What is it? Can it be acquired? The second question can be more clearly answered than the first. The answer to it is "No." The instinct for the theatre will not, by itself, make a great dramatist of a man, but without it no one can become a dramatist at all. What it is, is difficult to define. It is probably, but not certainly, possessed by those persons who, when they begin to write, naturally express themselves in dialogue rather than in narrative, and one might fairly conclude that when a man prefers the play-form to any other, he, too, possesses the instinct for the stage; but full consideration of the facts shows that a man may be a master of dialogue and yet not be a dramatist. The instinct for the theatre has been possessed by men whose dialogue was stilted and clumsily artificial, and I have read novels by authors, innocent, so far as I was aware, of any dramatic writing, who possessed it abundantly. It is an instinct which not only enables its owner to express himself freely in dialogue and equips him with a

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knowledge of stage-technique (not necessarily acquired by familiarity with what happens "behind the scenes"), but also causes him to present the incidents of his story swiftly and tersely. Diffuseness may be very entertaining in a novel, but it is intolerably dull on the stage, and it is the death of drama. The admirers of Mr Henry James could never have admired him, had he abandoned novels and persisted in his attempts to be a dramatist. Those long, circumlocutory sentences which are alleged to be fascinating by those who like to see words drawn out and strangled, must have caused incessant yawning in the theatre had they been uttered on the stage. The whole of what is called "literary drama" is worthy to be cited in illustration of work done by men who have not got the instinct for the theatre. Mr G. D. Gribble's fantastic piece, *The Masque of Venice*, could, indeed, be used as a textbook by professors who are anxious to enlighten their pupils on the subject. This play reveals no signs that its author has the faintest conception of what drama is. If Mr Gribble possesses any instinct for the theatre, he very carefully conceals it in *The Masque of Venice*.

The "literary drama" is generally full of stiff sentences that have more resemblance to the language used in editorial articles and "middles" printed in the weekly reviews than to the language used in conversation. The authors of these plays devote their talents almost entirely to the dialogue, and seldom devote much thought to the theme of the play or to the

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nature of the characters; the speech is usually overwrought, too pedantic and tidy. John Millington Synge had more feeling for the theatre than the majority of "literary" dramatists, but his dialogue is contrived stuff, withdrawn from reality and made into a pattern, pretty enough, but, after a time, tiresome and tedious. In *The Aran Islands*, he tells us that he once heard an old man say:

"Bedad, noble person, I'm thinking it's soon that you'll be getting married. Listen to what I'm telling you: a man who is not married is no better than an old jackass. He goes into his sister's house, and into his brother's house; he eats a bit in this place and a bit in another place, but he has no home for himself; like an old jackass straying on the rocks."

When he came to write *The Playboy of the Western World*, he remembered that speech, and, dressing it up, put it into the mouth of Michael James Flaherty:

"It's the will of God, I'm thinking, that all should win an easy or a cruel end, and it's the will of God that all should rear up lengthy families for the nurture of the earth. What's a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking a sup in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braying jackass strayed upon the rocks."

Any dramatist will instantly recognize that the first of these quotations is dramatic dialogue, whereas the second is merely ornate literary stuff. The contrast between the speech spoken by Maurya at the end of *Riders to the Sea* and the speech spoken by Marty

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South at the end of Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* is equally remarkable. There is an odd identity in the form of the two speeches, but Hardy makes us feel that Marty's words belong entirely to her: Synge makes us feel that Maurya's words were put into her mouth by her author. This is what Maurya says when she hears of the death of her son:

"I'll have no call now to be crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting holy water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. . . ."

That highly contrived language seems to me to be entirely unrepresentative of the speech that Maurya was likely to use. There is some stiffness in the sentences uttered by Marty South as she laments over the grave of Giles Winterbourne, but the language she uses is wholly representative, even in its stiffness, of the speech that an actual Marty South of her time might have spoken over the body of an actual Giles Winterbourne:

"Now, my own, own love," she whispered, "you are mine, and on'y mine; for she has forgot 'ee at last, although for her you died! But I—whenever I get up, I'll think of 'ee, and whenever I lie down I'll think of 'ee. Whenever I plant the young larches, I'll think that none can plant as you planted; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider wring,

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I'll say none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name,  
let me forget home and heaven! . . . But no, no, my love, I  
never can forget 'ee; for you was a good man, and did good  
things!"

The fault of over-elaboration of dialogue is common among Irish authors. Lady Gregory writes dialogue which, although it is speakable ("literary" dialogue seldom is), tends, especially in her later plays, to be inactive and, therefore, undramatic. There is no movement at all in the first half of the first act of *The Dragon*, and what she calls the Kiltartan dialogue, derived from Synge's, is more formalised in this piece than it is in her *Seven Short Plays*, and can, I feel, only be spoken in a highly declamatory fashion. The following passage taken from *The Dragon* contains speakable, but inactive, dialogue:

QUEEN (*coming in*). I was in search of you.

KING. I thought you were in Nuala's sunny parlour, learning her to play music and to go through books.

QUEEN. That is what I thought to do. But I hadn't hardly started to teach her the principles of conversation and the branches of relationships and kindred of the big people of the earth, when she plucked off the coverings I had put over the cages, and set open their doors, till the fiery birds of Sabes and the canaries of the eastern world were screeching around my head, giving out every class of cry and call.

KING. So they would too.

QUEEN. The royal eagles stirred up till I must quit the place with their squawking, and the enchanted swans raising up their heads and pecking at the beadwork on my gown.

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KING. Ah, she has a wish for the birds of the air that are by nature light and airy, the same as herself.

QUEEN. It is time for her to turn her mind to good sense.

What's that? (*Whipping cloth from tray.*) Is it that you are eating again, and it is but one half-hour since your breakfast?

KING. Ah, that wasn't a breakfast you'd call a breakfast.

QUEEN. Very healthy food, oaten meal flummery with whey and a griddle-cake; dandelion tea and sorrel from the fields.

KING. My old fathers ate their enough of wild herbs and the like in the early time of the world. I'm thinking that it is in my nature to require a good share of nourishment as if to make up for the hardships they went through.

QUEEN. What now have you within that pastry wall?

KING. It is but a little leveret pie.

QUEEN (*poking it with fork*). Leveret! What's this in it? The thickness of a blanket of beef; calves' sweetbreads; cocks' combs; balls mixed with livers and with spice. You to so much as taste of it, you'll be crippled and crappled with the gout, and roaring out in your pain.

KING. I tell you my generations have enough done of fasting and for making little of the juicy meats of the world,

and so on for another couple of pages. Later, in the same act, an old man, called Fintan, delivers a speech which is nearly unspeakable and is, in every respect, undramatic dialogue:

KING. Fintan! What is it brings you here on this day?

FINTAN (*a very old man in strange clothes at window*). What brings me is to put my curse upon the whole tribe of kitchen boys that are gone and vanished out of this, without bringing me my request, that was a bit of rendered lard that

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would limber the swivel of my spy-glass, that is clogged with the dripping of the cave.

I will not discuss the question of whether or not this dialogue is representative of actual speech. Mr George Moore has devoted some of his peculiar and acidulous talent to proving that it is not, and I am compelled to state that, although I have lived in the north and the west and the east of Ireland, I have never heard anything like it. And if anyone asks, "Don't you wish you had?" I shall answer, "No, I do not!" There are too many emotional orators in Ireland for any Irishman to wish to see bog-trotting D'Annunzios added to their number. The speech that is commonly heard in the country parts of Ireland is simpler than Synge's or Lady Gregory's, and may fairly be called the remnant of Elizabethan language, the speech which Shakespeare spoke, the language in which the Authorised Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer are written. My present purpose, however, is merely to point out that this language, whether it be representative or unrepresentative of real speech, speakable or unspeakable, is totally undramatic. We may believe that there is an agreeable quality in it, despite its look of labour, but this agreeable quality vanishes when more than a few speeches are read or spoken in succession. The attention begins to wander from the play, because the action is clogged by the words. When a character attempts to move, he is tripped up

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by a string of tedious sentences. It is here that we discover what is the task which has to be performed by the dramatist. His business is to write dialogue which shall have the look of literature and the sound of the street: it must have the similitude of ordinary conversation and, at the same time, be attractive and compact and shapely. Any educated person can compose dialogue which will not outrage the rules of grammar, but grammatical exactness is not enough: it can, indeed, destroy drama by robbing the characters of their spontaneity and life. It is equally easy for any educated person, with a sense of style, to compose dialogue which is gracious in its shape and can be described as "literary," but literary style is not enough: it can destroy drama by making the characters appear to be creatures out of a book rather than creatures out of life. The dialogue must be selected and shapely, and yet seem to be as broken and unshapely as actual speech is; and it must be strong enough to bear the burden of the play, for the dialogue has not only to be interesting in itself and to reveal the nature of the person who speaks it, but to carry on and develop the theme. Chekhov uses his dialogue supremely well. He takes a pile of words which scarcely seem to have any relevance to each other, almost to be without any significance, and he makes them acquire meaning as they move together, until at last the whole fantastic pile is found in a unity of significant words that rise up and reveal themselves with astonishing clarity. One of the

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many reasons why novelists fail to write good plays is that they do not realise the difference between dialogue which is written to be read and dialogue which is written to be said. We can, without difficulty, read speeches which would be hard to speak and as hard to hear. The reader may test this statement for himself by trying to read aloud dialogue in novels which he is able to read in silence without suffering any embarrassment. He will find himself continually stumbling over sentences that, although they seem to be conversational, are, in fact, stiffly bookish. There is no question here of long or short words, but of words which run well together when they are spoken. Shakespeare runs polysyllables and monosyllables in the same sentence or speech without causing the speaker to feel that his tongue is being torn out by the roots:

the multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red,

but the “literary” dramatist formalises his sentences excessively, and so destroys the drama.

## V

THE apprentice dramatist must put out of his mind any belief he may have that the form of the play is very like any other literary form. It is not. If he starts to write a play in the way in which he would start to write a novel, he will gravely imperil his career as a dramatist. Many eminent novelists have attempted to write plays without, apparently, possessing any knowledge of the technique of the theatre, or even seeming to be aware that there is such a technique, or that it is vastly different from that of the novel. Conrad, when he dramatised his novel, *The Secret Agent*, hopelessly bungled his job and presented his audience with a piece so clumsily and incompetently constructed that his most devoted admirers were obliged to admit that there was no drama in it. He was, it is said, offended with the critics who pointed out the defects of his play. Mr Galsworthy, who has successfully practised both forms of writing—the novel and the play—read Conrad's piece in manuscript and told him that it would not do, but Conrad made no alteration in it, and the play miserably perished after a few apathetic performances. I cannot pretend to feel sorry for Conrad's misfortune on that occasion. If a man *will*

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attempt to use a form with which he is unfamiliar, and will *not* take the trouble to acquaint himself with its technique, nor listen to the advice of those who have mastered it, he is neither entitled to feel astonished when the result of his labour is a complete mess, nor to expect sympathy from those who observe the mess. It is true that faults in a play are rarely realised by its author with so much clearness, however skilfully attention is drawn to them by critics, as when, in a moment of vision, he sees them for himself. That moment of vision is generally experienced during a performance of the play before an audience which has paid for its seats. Some authors, however, are incapable of believing that their work can be faulty, and they make themselves and their friends miserable with long-winded complaints of the malignancy and even corruption of critics who omit to recognise their genius.

If I were asked to name novelists who had not got the dramatic instinct, I should mention, among others, Conrad, Henry James, and Mr George Moore. All of these authors several times attempted the stage, and on each occasion that they did so, their incapacity for the task was made obvious. If I were asked to name an author who might, had he devoted his talents seriously to the task, have become a great dramatist, I should mention Thomas Hardy. His dialogue, especially in *Jude the Obscure*, as I shall, in a later section of this book, point out, was sometimes stiffer than a dramatist's dialogue ought to be, but his mind moved

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dramatically. *The Dynasts* is immensely dramatic, although, because of its shape and length and situations, it is nearly unactable. Had Mr Somerset Maugham never written a play in his life, I should acclaim him as a potential dramatist on the strength of one of his novels, *The Painted Veil*, in which the dramatic instinct is abundantly manifested. No one but a born dramatist could possibly have written that novel in the way that it is written. I have named these authors, possessed and not possessed of the dramatic instinct, so that the student of stage technique may investigate their work and discover for himself, as, indeed, he must, what is meant by the instinct for the theatre. The similarities between novels and plays have caused people to be blind to the greater dissimilarities between them. It is true that the dramatist and the novelist are both telling stories, but the novelist is telling his story not only in a *shape* that is different from that used by the dramatist, but in a *way* which, if it were used by the dramatist, would wreck his play; and it is because novelists either will not or cannot realise the difference between the form of the novel and the form of the play that they rarely achieve success in the theatre. The monetary rewards of a dramatist, when he is popular, are immense; and the novelist, therefore, is tempted to repeat in the theatre the story which he has already told in a book. If Mr A., the dramatist, can make £15,000 out of a story told on the stage, why should he, who is cleverer than A.,

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not make that sum, too? And so, gaily, lightheartedly, the novelist turns his novel into a play, and is astounded to discover, if it be produced at all, that it is a complete failure. He then retires to his study mumbling to himself that plays are poor things at the best, and that a man of real and conspicuous literary talent will not allow himself to be confined within the narrow limit of the drama. In this contemptuous way does the novelist dispose of the craft which was practised by Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Terence, Racine, Shakespeare, Molière, Lope de Vega, Calderon, Sheridan, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, and Bernard Shaw, casting upon the play the reproach which should be cast upon his own incompetence.

Oddly enough, many dramatists fail to realise the difference between the technique of the play and that of the moving picture, as completely as the novelist fails to realise the difference between the technique of the play and the technique of the novel. I have seen many dramatic adaptations of novels made by novelists, all of whom with singular unanimity made the same mistakes. There are authors who are both accomplished dramatists and novelists: for example, Mr John Galsworthy and Mr Somerset Maugham; but novelists are nearly always failures when they write plays, though dramatists are frequently successful when they write novels. This may be because the story-telling faculty is common to them both, whereas the dramatic

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faculty is possessed only by the dramatist. In almost every dramatisation of a novel made by a novelist, the whole of the first and about half of the second act is spent in explaining what happened before the play began. The novelist, indeed, has a passion for explanation. He insists on telling the audience about his characters, instead of letting his characters speak for themselves, and he seems to be incapable of arranging his story in such a shape that whatever the audience needs to know is actively revealed inside the play. The playgoer wants to see the thing happening: he does not want to be told that it has already happened.

The first law, therefore, of play-writing is that the events of the play must be seen by the audience. This does not mean that there shall be no history in it, or that the characters shall step on to the stage and begin from zero. They may have as much history as they need, but if the dramatist spends long portions of his play in describing, what may be called, "expired" events, then he will bore his audience, because he will be giving them descriptions and reminiscences instead of drama. This law of drama has many times been expounded; yet some extraordinary disability of the mind prevents ninety-nine out of a hundred novelists from understanding it, and I am nearly certain that when next I see a play made by a novelist out of one of his novels, the curtain will ascend on a first act entirely explanatory of expired events, and that the

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author will not begin his play until the middle of the second act.

The dramatist must tell his story as far as possible within the limits of the play. He must not draw too lavishly upon the past, nor must he, in dramatising a novel, depend upon the memory of his audience. Too many adaptors of novels for the stage assume that those who will see the play performed will have read the novel, and will faithfully remember the play. That is a lazy way in which to work: it is also stupid; and I would lay it down as a law in dramatising novels that the dramatist should tell the story as if no one but himself had ever read it. When he assumes that all the persons in the theatre will know the story, he is likely to make gaps in it which will leave it nearly unintelligible to those who have not read it. The adaptor of a novel has no right to presume upon the fore-knowledge of his audience, but should do his job as if he were writing a play out of his own imagination and not out of a book. He should remember that events which seem plausible in a novel may seem extraordinarily implausible in a play. The dramatist, therefore, more than the novelist, is obliged to have regard for probability. Characters are less concretely in the presence of the reader than they are in that of the playgoer. There, on the stage, are the people; and, if they do or say things which outrage or strain the understanding or experience of the playgoer, the fact is more apparent to him than it would be if he were

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to read about it in a book. The foolish behaviour of Mark Sabre, during the inquest on the girl who had poisoned herself, was accepted by the readers of *If Winter Comes* with greater credulity and patience than it was by playgoers, and the failure of the play, following after the enormous success of the novel, was due to the fact that inconsistencies and improbabilities of character and conduct are instantly apparent on the stage, although they may not be apparent in the book. An interesting example of this difference in effect between the novel and the play is to be found in Thomas Hardy's dramatisation of his novel, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. In the novel (Chapter LVI) after Tess has killed Alec, the landlady, Mrs Brooks, listens at the door of the bedroom. Tess has departed and "the dead silence" is "broken only by a regular beat. Drip, drip, drip." The scene is immensely effective in the novel, but it nearly ruined the play. Hardy's innate sense of the theatre was demonstrated by the masterly way in which he handled his stage after Tess had committed the murder. We saw her enter the bedroom, heard Alec's cry as she stabbed him, and then we saw her, silently and with distant eyes fixed upon the door of the dead man's room, creeping towards the door of the sitting-room which led to the landing outside. No word was spoken, and as Tess left the scene, the feeling in the audience was intense. For a few moments the stage was empty, and the emptiness added to the emotional effect of her exit.

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The curtain should then have fallen, as, indeed, at later performances it did, but Hardy, inexpert in stage-craft, kept it up so that he might bring Mrs Brooks on to the stage. He caused her to stand outside the bedroom door and ask, anxiously, whether anything was wrong because blood was coming through the floor—drip, drip, drip! As she spoke those words, the entire audience changed its mood as if it were a single person . . . and, suddenly, people who had been deeply moved were tittering!

## VI

THERE are other and more obvious differences between plays and novels. A play is written almost entirely in dialogue. There are no descriptions of scenery or characters. The scenery is provided by the scene-painter, and the appearance of the character is apparent on the stage: their nature has to be revealed to the audience in their talk or their actions. The play must be of a length which will enable it to be performed inside three hours. There are, of course, plays of greater length; but the rule holds good, in spite of the fact that *Hamlet* and *Man and Superman* in their entirety, would take nearly six hours to act. *Saint Joan* takes the better part of four hours. Mr Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* is longer than any of these.

This law of length is not a rigid one. All of the Elizabethan plays are much longer than modern plays, but the plays of Molière are short. The Elizabethan liked long plays and was not hampered by the inconvenience of late dinner and last trains. He probably walked from his home to the theatre, and because he dined in the afternoon and not in the evening, the dramatists of his day were not obliged to "cut their cackle" to the requirements of chefs. I do not suppose [32]

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any Elizabethan left the theatre before the end of the play, unless he was bored by it. One did not see in those days members of the audience anxiously peering at their watches and eventually rushing from the theatre before the play was over, in terror lest they should arrive at a railway station in time to see the last train depart. Many modern plays are so short that, although they do not begin, in London, until nearly nine o'clock, they are over by eleven, despite the fact that the intervals between the acts may be as long as fifteen minutes. Complaint, indeed, has been made by provincial playgoers that they do not get value for their money; and there has actually been a demand made by theatre managers for what they call "provincial pieces"—that is to say, plays which are not only less "daring" than those which are sometimes seen in capital cities, but are also more substantial in body.

The novelist is not subject to the limitations of time and space as is the dramatist. His novel may contain forty thousand words or two hundred and fifty thousand words. It may be as short as Miss Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, or Mr Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, or as long as Mr Sinclair Lewis's *Martin Arrowsmith*, or Mr H. G. Wells's *The World of William Clissold*, which fills three volumes. The novelist, too, can range over greater areas and through longer periods of time than the dramatist. He can shift his scene with more frequency and can

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cover longer periods in the lives of his characters. There are many novels of the “cradle to the grave” sort; but, although Mr Arnold Bennett and Mr Edward Knoblock attempted with considerable success to make a play of that kind in *Milestones*, they yet were unable to do so on the scale so successfully employed by Mr Bennett in *The Old Wives’ Tale*. Thomas Hardy’s great poetic drama, *The Dynasts*, cannot possibly be put on the stage—was not, in fact, intended to be staged, although a few scenes from it have been publicly performed. How, for example, is a producer, even in a theatre as large as Drury Lane, to stage Scene IV, Part First:

### “THE HARBOUR OF BOULOGNE

“The morning breaks, radiant with early sunlight. The French Army of Invasion is disclosed. On the hills on either side of the town and behind appear large military camps formed of timber huts. Lower down are other camps of more or less permanent kind, the whole affording accommodation for one hundred and fifty thousand men.

“South of the town is an extensive basin surrounded by quays, the heaps of fresh soil around showing it to be a recent excavation from the banks of the Liane. The basin is crowded with the flotilla, consisting of hundreds of vessels of sundry kinds: flat-bottomed brigs with guns and two masts; boats of one mast, carrying each an artillery wagon, two guns, and a two-stalled horse-box; transports with three low masts; and long narrow pinnaces arranged for many oars.

“Timber, saw-mills, and new-cut planks spread in profusion around, and many of the town residences are seen to be adapted for warehouses and infirmaries.

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### "DUMB SHOW

"Moving in this scene are countless companies of soldiery, engaged in drill-practice of embarking and disembarking, and of hoisting horses into the vessels and landing them again. Vehicles bearing provisions of many sorts load and unload before the temporary warehouses. Further off, on the open land, bodies of troops are at field-drill. Other bodies of soldiers, half-stripped and encrusted with mud, are labouring as navvies in repairing the excavations.

"An English squadron of about twenty sail, comprising a ship or two of the line, frigates, brigs and luggers, confronts the busy spectacle from the sea.

"The Show presently dims and becomes broken, till only its flashes and gleams are visible. Anon a curtain of cloud closes over it."

It may be that *The Dynasts* will some day be made into a moving picture; but, so far as one can see now, it can never be performed in the theatre. Certain things can be done on the screen that cannot be done on the stage. The old-fashioned sensational melodrama which was once so popular at Drury Lane has been killed by the moving picture, because spectacular scenes can be far more effectively performed by the cinematograph than they can be in the theatre.

The dramatist has to contend not only with social customs, such as late dinner and the habit of living in places which are reached by train, and the inability of people to sit through a theatrical entertainment for longer than a certain number of hours because they

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tire or become stupefied by the vitiated atmosphere; but he has also to contend with the actual physical limitations of the theatre itself. The novelist can say: "The scene changes from High Street, Brixton, to an island in the South Seas" without any expenditure of labour or time, but the dramatist cannot do this. He has to show you both the High Street in Brixton and the island in the South Seas; and, in order that he may do so, scene-shifters have to be employed to make the change, and time must be occupied in making it. The dramatist soon discovers that he must be more niggardly with his changes of scene than the novelist needs to be. They are expensive. Before the War he was encouraged to vary his scene: the audience liked alteration, and felt that it was being stingily served by an author who offered it a scene which was not changed at all; but, because the expenses of production are heavy, the dramatist is now discouraged from altering his scene too often. If a manager is offered two plays of equal merit, one with a large number of characters and many changes of scene, the other with a few characters and no change of scene, he will certainly choose the second; because the cost of producing it will be enormously less than the cost of producing the first. It is rare now for a play to be performed with more than a dozen characters in it. In Shakespeare's time it was rare for a play to be performed with less than a score of characters. There are about thirty speaking parts in *Hamlet*, together with a large

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number of supernumerary parts. If a play with so long a cast as that were sent to a modern manager, it would probably be returned to its author unread.

These are all matters, not so much of the play, as of the theatre; and many of them are temporary in nature. When, for example, the financial conditions of the theatre have been made easier than they now are, the author will not have to keep in mind the necessity of reducing the expenses of production, and will feel free to write plays with many characters and changes of scene. The apprentice author may say to himself: "I will anticipate these changes, and I will write plays which will be acceptable when the changes have been made"; but he must be prepared, if he does, to be excluded from the contemporary theatre.

## VII

A FAULT in writing plays which the young dramatist must strive to avoid is redundancy or repetition, in character or in situation or in speech. Repetition, which is sometimes used with great effect by the novelist, can rarely be used with effect by the dramatist. Even when it can be justified intellectually it is nearly always wrong dramatically. Mr Bernard Shaw made a tremendous effect on the first night of *Pygmalion*, by putting the word “bloody” into the mouth of a flower-girl; but when, a few moments later, it was put into the mouth of a middle-class girl and used by her for pretentious purposes, it became remarkably ineffective. Intellectually, Mr Shaw had complete warrant for the second use of this word. He wanted to show the difference between natural usage and affected usage. But, dramatically, he had no warrant at all. Indeed, its use on the second occasion slightly reduced the effect made by its use on the first occasion. Mr Sean O’Casey, in his play *Juno and the Paycock*, deeply moved his audience at the end of his second act by making a poor woman address a prayer to the Sacred Heart. Her son had been ambushed and murdered in one of the wars that used to break out in Ireland every fortnight. The tormented woman had just

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heard of her son's death, and she came to Juno, her neighbour, for consolation. This is the prayer she spoke:

"Sacred Heart of the Crucified Jesus, take away our hearts o' stone . . . an' give us hearts o' flesh! . . . Take away this murdherin' hate . . . an' give us Thine own eternal love!"

It profoundly stirred all who heard it spoken at that poignant moment. But Mr O'Casey used it again in the third act when Juno heard of her own son's murder. He caused her to repeat, almost word for word, what her neighbour had said in the second act; and the effect of this repetition was startling. The audience became restless, for a profoundly moving, dramatic, and human situation had been turned into a theatrical trick. We forgot that we were in a theatre when we first heard the prayer: we remembered that we were in a theatre when we heard it repeated. I am dogmatic about that. I am certain that Mr O'Casey made a grievous mistake when he caused Juno to repeat so carefully her neighbour's words; but I ought to add that a contributor to *The Nation and Athenæum* praised this repetition and described it as a magnificent anti-climax. There is probably no law that anyone can lay down about the drama which cannot be broken with complete success by somebody. Anti-climax is commonly considered to be fatal to any effect, yet one of Shakespeare's most successful scenes, the last act of *The Merchant of Venice*, is an anti-climax from start

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to finish. Nevertheless, repetition is the most dangerous of the devices that a dramatist can use. Gogol, in his play *The Government Inspector*, ruined a fine comedy situation by repeating it three times in a single act. It was extremely funny the first time, not so funny the second, and absolutely dire the third. The reader may discover for himself how skilfully an author can repeat situations, when it is essential to his theme that he should do so, by examining the casket scenes in *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare separates them. He does not commit the error of letting the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Aragon and Bassanio make their choice in the same scene. The choice made by Morocco is totally different in detail from that made by Bassanio. Monotony is here abolished by a great effort of ingenuity. No one but an author highly adept in the technique of the drama could have invented that effect; and here it may be said that the best method of studying stage-craft is to examine the way in which great authors do their work. The trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice* and the screen scene in *The School for Scandal* are amazingly fine pieces of technique, apart altogether from their other merits. So are the first act of Barrie's comedy, *What Every Woman Knows*, and the first act of Mr Lennox Robinson's *The Lost Leader*, yet I doubt if there is a sillier plot in any play, not a musical comedy, than there is in *The Merchant of Venice*. Sheridan, in the very comedy which contains the brilliant screen scene, offers us

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examples of clumsy and incompetent or, more probably in his case, lazy craftsmanship. In the first scene of the first act, Snake, in a long speech, informs Lady Sneerwell of facts about herself which must have been better known to her than to him, and in the second scene of the same act, Sir Peter Teazle comes on to the stage and tells himself, no other person being present, the facts of his marriage. Why? Sheridan is anxious to give information about his people to the audience, but he is too lazy to give it in a competent manner, so he gives it in an idle, easy way, sacrificing all verisimilitude in doing so.

The dramatist has to be extremely economical. He has to obtain his effects by a series of short-cuts, and must not use two words where one will do. Compared with the novelist, he must be miserly. If he is not careful to express the utmost feeling in the fewest words, he will lose effect. Mr Bernard Shaw ruins a speech in *Heartbreak House* by an excess of language. Mangan, the coarse millionaire, says to Ellie Dunn: "Now what do you think of me, Miss Ellie?" And this passage of dialogue follows:

ELLIE (*dropping her hands*). How strange! that my mother, who knew nothing at all about business, should have been quite right about you! She always said—not before papa, of course, but to us children—that you were just that sort of man.

MANGAN (*sitting up, much hurt*). Oh! did she? And yet she'd have let you marry me.

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ELLIE. Well, you see, Mr. Mangan, my mother married a very good man—for whatever you may think of my father as a man of business, he is the soul of goodness—and she is not at all keen on my doing the same.

I suggest to the reader that, if the words in parenthesis are omitted from Ellie's last speech, the speech will be improved. The lines are humorous and are intended to excite laughter. They do not excite it, because the speech is too explanatory. Repetition and redundancy and excess of speech are faults, therefore, against which the dramatist must continually be on his guard. He ought not to introduce characters into his play unless they are essential to it. This law would seem to be obvious, but it is astonishing how many apprentice dramatists will crowd their cast with characters who are totally unnecessary. I have read manuscripts of plays in which a character is employed to say a few sentences that might have been spoken by another character already in the play. Thomas Hardy, in his own adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, brings into the first scene a character who never appears in the play again. This is the clergyman who tells Durbeyville of his ancestry and his real name. His brief speech could easily be conveyed to the audience without him. The whole of that scene, indeed, is unnecessary, because nothing is in it which could not, with a little technical skill, be expressed in the second scene by an essential character. Mr C. K. Munro is a persistent sinner in this matter of excess of length

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and repetition and redundancy. In his play *The Mountain*, there are at least four scenes, two of them long ones, which could be cut to the advantage of the play. Two of them, indeed, were cut when the play was performed by the Stage Society; but these two were short ones, performed in dumb show. The two long unnecessary scenes were retained, with the result that a play of considerable quality was made tedious to the audience because it lasted for too long a time.

## VIII

IF I were asked for a short rule about the drama, I should say that the dramatist ought to put into his play only those things which, if they were omitted, would leave wounds. The danger of such a rule, of course, is that an author may write too sparingly; but it is better to be spare than to be tedious, and the danger of the second is greater than that of the first.

Oddly enough, the inexperienced author is often inclined to write too little rather than too much, a statement which can be proved by the history of nearly every dramatist. First plays are generally short plays. Length and garrulity come upon an author with experience. *Candida* and *Widowers' Houses* are short plays: *Heartbreak House* and *Back to Methuselah* and *Saint Joan* are very long ones. I once read the manuscript of a five-act tragedy by a young author, which, apart from the time occupied in changing the scenery, could have been acted in twenty minutes. The following is the whole of the second act:

*The scene is a girl's room in a cottage. The room is in darkness: the heroine is in bed. She opens her eyes, she shuts her eyes: she clenches her hands and unclenches them: she tosses and turns, and then exclaims aloud:*

Oh God! help me to be brave!

*Curtain.*

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This play was written by an adult who had written a good deal of poetry, and was, presumably, capable of exercising some judgment; but the account I have given of his play will indicate that, when he came to writing drama, he had no judgment at all. He evidently imagined that a great deal of time would be occupied by the “business” of the girl’s agitation. But time on the stage is briefer than time in life. An act lasts say, for half an hour, but, imaginatively, it lasts for a longer time. The characters appear to be spending an evening or an afternoon or a morning on their affairs, although in actual time of performance we have had no more than half an hour of them. My meaning will become clear when the reader remembers that the whole business of the average play, including intervals, is transacted in two or three hours. Now, two or three hours of the life of any one of us would not furnish much material for a story; and it becomes obvious, therefore, that time *inside* the play has been telescoped, although time *outside* the play remains normal. There are two times in the theatre: there is the time occupied by the actual performance of the play, and the time which is supposed to elapse *during* the action. A play performs for about as long as it takes to read aloud. The scene which I have quoted would act for fifteen seconds, which, even in these days, is very short measure. Young authors expect pauses to last far longer than they must, if the play is not to bore the audience. We talk of pausing

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for five minutes, and we do very frequently in life pause for that time; but an actor on the stage can only suggest such a pause: he must not actually make it. To give up several precious minutes out of thirty or forty to a mere pause is wasteful. The whole business of acting is to make an audience believe that something has happened which, in fact, has not happened at all. There is another important point to be noted about this brief act, which is that, even if it could be adequately lengthened by pauses, by opening eyes and shutting eyes, clenching and unclenching fists, there would not be any point in all this business, for the simple reason that the entire scene is not only played in bed—where the scope for dramatic gestures is somewhat restricted—but in total darkness. The audience would not see the lady's agitation. Inexperienced authors are very fond of darkness on the stage. They imagine that it is more dramatic than light. They do not know that a person who is heard, but not seen, is less audible than a person who is seen and heard. The reader may test this statement by listening to a preacher whom he cannot see.<sup>1</sup>

It must not be supposed, however, from the preceding criticism that a brief scene will not be effective on the stage. Brief acts are unlikely to be effective, espe-

<sup>1</sup> A special technique may be invented for broadcast plays which will overcome this defect in things which are heard but not seen. It seems obvious that plays with little physical action in them are less suitable for broadcasting than plays that are entirely "talky-talky," but the B.B.C. is very ingenious in finding devices to suggest action and may remove this defect.

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cially one so brief as that which has just been examined; but a short scene can be extraordinarily effective, as Mr John Galsworthy proved in his play *Justice*,<sup>2</sup> in which there is a scene—the third in the third act—which is profoundly moving in performance. This scene is notable for the fact that not one word is spoken in it. The following is the scene in Mr Galsworthy's words: and a comparison of it with the act I have already examined will, I think, clearly indicate the difference between the work of a dramatist and the work of a man who has not yet learned what drama is:

"In fast-failing daylight, FALDER, in his stockings, is seen standing motionless, with his head inclined towards the door, listening. He moves a little closer to the door, his stockinginged feet making no noise. He stops at the door. He is trying harder and harder to hear something, any little thing that is going on outside. He springs suddenly upright—as if at a sound—and remains perfectly motionless. Then, with a heavy sigh, he moves to his work, and stands looking at it, with his head down; he does a stitch or two, having the air of a man so lost in sadness that each stitch is, as it were, a coming to life. Then, turning abruptly, he begins pacing his cell, moving his head, like an animal pacing its cage. He stops again at the door, listens, and, placing the palms of his hands against it with his fingers spread out, leans his forehead against the iron. Turning from it, presently, he paces back towards the window, holding his head, as if he felt that it were going to burst, and stops under the window. But since he cannot see out of it he leaves off looking, and picking up the lid of one of the tins, peers into it, as if trying to make a companion of his own

\*Mr Edgar Wallace proved it, too, in the penultimate scene of his play, *The Squeaker*.

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face. It has grown very nearly dark. Suddenly the lid falls out of his hand with a clatter—the only sound that has broken the silence—and he stands staring intently at the wall where the stuff of the shirt is hanging rather white in the darkness—he seems to be seeing somebody or something there. There is a sharp tap and click; the cell light behind the glass screen has been turned up. The cell is brightly lighted. FALDER is seen gasping for breath.

“A sound from far away, as of distant, dull beating on thick metal, is suddenly audible. FALDER shrinks back, not able to bear this sudden clamour. But the sound grows, as though some great tumbril were rolling towards the cell. And gradually it seems to hypnotise him. He begins creeping inch by inch nearer to the door. The beating sound, travelling from cell to cell, draws closer and closer; FALDER’s hands are seen moving as if his spirit had already joined in this beating, and the sound swells till it seems to have entered the very cell. He suddenly raises his clenched fists. Panting violently, he flings himself at his door, and beats on it.”

*The curtain falls.*

## IX

SOME authors have great difficulty in suggesting the lapse of time in an act. Marlowe, whose craftsmanship was extraordinarily clumsy, was either too careless or too incompetent to cope with this difficulty, and his plays are occasionally made ridiculous by his inability or refusal to be plausible. In a book of mine, called *The Organised Theatre*, I have examined Marlowe's stagecraft at length, and I will quote a passage from it dealing with this point of the lapse of time in an act. (The reader must understand that I am not referring to the lapse of time *between* the acts, but the lapse of time *inside* them.)

"Marlowe took a youthful delight in robbing his characters of verisimilitude and he almost went out of his way to be implausible. He had a singular affection for wholesale slaughter. When Tamburlaine made war on Bajazeth, the Emperor of the Turks, he defeated him in less than two minutes after the battle began! In that time, Bajazeth was made a prisoner and three of his contributory kings were killed! When the Egyptian Virgins came out of Damascus to plead for peace, Tamburlaine immediately ordered them to be slain. 'Away with them, I say, and show them death!' he exclaims to Techelles, and exactly forty-eight seconds later, Techelles returns and tells Tamburlaine that the Virgins have not only been

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slain by his horsemen, but that their bodies have been pinned to the walls of Damascus! The officers of the Governor of Malta seized the goods of Barabas ninety seconds after they were instructed to do so. In that time, they left the Governor's Palace, visited the house of Barabas, seized his goods, and returned to the Palace to tell the Governor what they had done. When the people of Babylon opposed Tamburlaine, he ordered the burghers to be bound hand and foot and thrown into the lake; and when Techelles asked what was to be done with their wives and children, he said:

‘Techelles, drown them all, man, woman, and child;  
Leave not a Babylonian in the town.’

And Techelles, a plain, matter-of-fact soldier-man, immediately went out and obeyed this command. A minute and a quarter after he received it, he returned to say that the whole of the inhabitants of Babylon had been drowned!

‘I have fulfill'd your highness' will, my lord:  
Thousands of men, drown'd in Asphaltis' lake,  
Have made the water swell above the banks,  
And fishes, fed by human carcases,  
Amaz'd, swim up and down upon the waves,  
As when they swallow asafoetida,  
Which makes them fleet aloft and gape for air.'

In *The Jew of Malta* a whole nunnery is poisoned with a porringer of rice in a remarkably short space of time. Pilia-Borza, in this play, carries a letter from Ithamore, the slave, to Barabas, delivers it, and returns to Ithamore in three-quarters of a minute!

“This is not imagination: it is lack both of imagination and of technical skill: and it is such defects in his work as these which have kept Marlowe's plays off the stage for too long a time. The plain man will not permit even a genius to contra-

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dict the facts of his experience. And the author who fails to make the incredible thing seem credible pays for his indolence or inefficiency by passing out of the popular knowledge."

Speeches spoken off stage are seldom successful, yet able authors sometimes make unseen characters indulge in long conversations. Mr Granville-Barker does this, ruinously, I think, in a play called *The Secret Life*, which has not yet been performed; and Mr Noel Coward, in his play *Sirocco*, not only causes a speech to be delivered off stage, but makes the character deliver it in Italian—a language not widely known in this country.

## X

How are lapses of time to be made plausible in a play? In fantastic plays, the trouble is overcome by ignoring it. Time will be topsy-turvy, too, in a topsy-turvy world. We are not shocked when Ariel executes the commands of Prospero in *The Tempest* in a few moments, nor is our understanding outraged when Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* states his intention of putting "a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes." We should feel shocked if Puck failed to perform that feat, and our understanding would be outraged if Ariel were to take a long time in obeying Prospero's orders, because we begin by accepting the convention in which these plays are written—a convention of miraculous and magical actions performed by persons who are either supernatural or possessed of supernatural powers. We even find in Puck's boast a prophecy of electric cables. There is, I daresay, a passage in Shakespeare which can be considered to be a forecast of wireless telegraphy. But the case is different in plays that are not fantastic, but are more or less realistic, in which the characters are offered to us as normal human beings. An audience will accept situations in *Peter Pan* which it will not accept in, say,

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*The Silver Box*; and the author who writes about normal human relationships is obliged to use a dexterity in shaping his play which is not demanded from the author of fantastic stuff. When, therefore, a servant is instructed to carry a message to someone at a distance from the sender of the message, the dramatist must exercise his ingenuity to discover a method of making the audience believe that that servant has actually gone out of the house and delivered the message and received an answer and brought it back again. There are several ways in which this may be done. An easy and, in my judgment, lazy method is to lower the curtain for a few moments, and invite the audience to believe that a certain amount of time elapses between the fall and the rise of the curtain. That method can, of course, only be used on a few occasions. A more effective method is one which has some resemblance to the devices used by the illusionist to distract the attention of the audience at the moment that the Disappearing Lady is about to perform the trick. The dramatist distracts the attention of his audience from the character who has to go from the stage and return again in a few minutes, by introducing at least two persons to the audience between the time of departure and the time of return. One of these characters should be important, and can be used to divert the attention towards another and interesting part of the play. The other character may only be a maid coming in to clear away a tea-table or to draw curtains. The point is

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that the mind of the audience must be shifted from its interest in the departed character; so that, when he or she returns, the audience will have forgotten that he went off the stage only a few moments before, and will believe that he has been away from it for as long as he asserts. A great deal of dramatic technique is merely illusion and trickery. Ingenuity has to be exercised, in order that players may have time to change their clothes. Inexperienced authors seldom realise that an actor takes about as long to alter his dress on the stage as any person does in ordinary life, and they will send a player off the stage in plus-fours and bring him back again in a few moments clothed in, what lady novelists used to call, "immaculate evening dress." In considering how I could best illustrate difficulties of this sort and the methods by which they are removed, I thought it best to analyse Sir James Barrie's short piece, *The Will*. I have chosen this play as an object-lesson in technique for apprentice authors, not only because it is short and can be briefly described, but because Sir James seems to have assembled in it all the difficulties that afflict a dramatist.

## X I

*The Will*, which is in three scenes, occupies about thirty minutes in performance: it certainly cannot occupy more than three-quarters of an hour; yet in that time thirty years are supposed to pass. The story is a simple one, starting in sentiment and ending in cynicism. There comes during the reign of Queen Victoria to the offices of Messrs Devizes, Devizes & Devizes, a firm of London lawyers, a newly-married couple, Philip and Emily Ross. He is determined to make a will and bequeath all he has to his wife; she is reluctant to tamper with the idea of his death, but is resolved, if there is to be a will at all, that he shall remember his cousins and make some charitable bequests. The lawyers, father and son, listen to the romantic pair, and the elder of the two is touched by their happiness and love, which seem slightly ridiculous to the younger man. The details of the will are jotted down by Mr Devizes, senior, and the Rosses depart. Then follows a conversation between the elder solicitor and his managing clerk, Surtees, in which the latter tells his employer that a specialist on the previous day had informed him that he was suffering from an incurable disease:

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MR DEVIZES. An operation. . . .

SURTEES. Too late, he said, for that. If I had been operated on long ago there might have been a chance.

MR DEVIZES. But you didn't have it long ago.

SURTEES. Not to my knowledge, sir; but he says it was there all the same, always in me, a black spot, not so big as a pin's head, but waiting to spread and destroy me in the fulness of time. All the rest of me as sound as a bell. . . .

MR DEVIZES (*helpless*). It seems damnable unfair.

SURTEES (*humbly*). I don't know, sir. He says there's a spot of that kind in pretty nigh all of us, and if we don't look out it does for us in the end.

MR DEVIZES (*hurriedly*). No, no, no.

SURTEES. He called it the accursed thing. I think he meant we should know of it and be on the watch. (*He pulls himself together.*) I'll see to this at once, sir.

That ends the first scene. When the curtain rises on the second scene, some twenty years are supposed to have passed. King Edward has succeeded to Queen Victoria. Surtees has been dead for a long time, and young Mr Devizes, who was so casual and light-hearted and lazy in the first scene, is now a middle-aged man with severe views on office discipline. "And, Sennet," he says to Surtees's successor, "less noise in the office, if you please."

SENNET (*glibly*). It was those young clerks, sir. . . .

ROBERT. They mustn't be young here, or they go. Tell them that.

SENNET (*glad to be gone*). Yes, sir.

Then Sennet shows in Mrs Ross, "not so much dressed, as richly upholstered." Mrs Ross suspects that

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her husband, now the owner of £70,000, is about to instruct his solicitor to rewrite his will for the fourth time. She has turned up to see that it is drawn to her desires. She is no longer the lachrymose, loving wife, shrinking from the thought of her husband's demise, but a fully-assured woman, convinced that she will survive him and determined that his money shall be left, unconditionally, to her. "It is to be mine absolutely, of course. Not just a life interest." The generous girl, eager that her husband should be charitable to his cousins and to hospitals, is lost in the hard grasping woman:

ROBERT. Will you keep the legacies as they are?

PHILIP. Well, there's that £500 for the hospitals.

EMILY. Yes, with so many claims on us, is that necessary?

PHILIP (*becoming stouter*). I'm going to make it £1000.

EMILY. Philip!

PHILIP. My mind is made up. I want to make a splash with the hospitals.

ROBERT (*hurrying to the next item*). There is £50 a year each to two cousins, ladies.

PHILIP. I suppose we'll keep that as it is, Emily?

EMILY. It was just gifts to them of £100 each, at first.

PHILIP. I was poor at that time myself.

EMILY. Do you think it's wise to load them with so much money? They'll not know what to do with it.

PHILIP. They're old.

EMILY. But they're wiry. £75 a year between them would surely be enough.

The third scene, ten years later—King George is now on the throne—begins with the arrival at the of-

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fice of the elder Mr Devizes, who has retired from business and is very old. His memory is clouded, and he imagines that he is back in the days before his retirement.

CREED (*not quite knowing what to do*). Mr Devizes has not come in yet, sir.

MR DEVIZES (*considering*). Yes, I have. Do you mean Mr Robert?

CREED. Yes, sir.

MR DEVIZES (*querulously*). Always late. Can't get that boy to settle down. (*Leniently*) Well, well, boys will be boys, eh, Surtees?

CREED (*wishing MR ROBERT would come*). My name is Creed, sir.

MR DEVIZES (*sharply*). Creed? Don't know you. Where is Surtees?

CREED. There is no one of that name in the office, sir.

MR DEVIZES (*growing timid*). No? I remember now. Poor Surtees! (*But his mind cannot grapple with troubles.*) Tell him I want him when he comes in.

Then the old gentleman falls asleep in a corner of the room, and while he is dozing, Ross—now Sir Philip—comes to alter his will again. He is a widower, his wife having died just before the title was conferred on him. Sir Philip is now enormously rich, and highly esteemed, but it is soon apparent that he is a miserable man. Both his children have “gone wrong on him.” His son has been sent abroad, after narrowly escaping imprisonment for some misdemeanour; his daughter has eloped with his chauffeur; and the dis-

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pointed, lonely man is determined to cut them out of his will. He instructs his solicitor as follows:—

PHILIP. I, Philip Ross, of 77 Bath Street, W., do hereby revoke all former wills and testaments, and I leave everything of which I die possessed. . . .

ROBERT. Yes?

PHILIP. Everything of which I die possessed. . . .

ROBERT. Yes?

PHILIP. I leave it—I leave it—(*the game is up*). My God, Devizes, I don't know what to do with it.

Then, while the discussion of the new will goes on, old Mr Devizes wakes from his sleep by the fire, and when he hears Sir Philip Ross's name he rambles through reminiscences of “a Mr Ross” he knew “long ago”:

ROBERT. This is the same.

MR DEVIZES (*annoyed*). No, no. A bright young fellow he was, with such a dear, pretty wife. They came to make a will. (*He chuckles.*) And bless me, they had only twopence halfpenny. I took a fancy to them: such a happy pair.

ROBERT (*apologetically*). The past is clearer to him than the present now-a-days. That will do, father.

PHILIP (*brusquely*). Let him go on.

MR DEVIZES. Poor souls, it all ended unhappily, you know.

PHILIP (*who is not brusque to him*). Yes, I know. Why did things go wrong, sir? I sit and wonder, and I can't find the beginning.

MR DEVIZES. That's the sad part of it. There was never a beginning. It was always there. He told me all about it.

ROBERT. He is thinking of something else; I don't know what.

PHILIP. Quiet. What was it that was always there?

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MR DEVIZES. It was always in them—a spot not bigger than a pin's head, but waiting to spread and destroy them in the fulness of time.

ROBERT. I don't know what he has got hold of.

PHILIP. He knows. Could they have done anything to prevent it, sir?

MR DEVIZES. If they had been on the watch. But they didn't know, so they weren't on the watch. Poor souls.

PHILIP. Poor souls.

MR DEVIZES. It's called the accursed thing. It gets nearly everybody in the end, if they don't look out.

The play ends soon after these speeches have been made. Sir Philip, tearing up the paper of instructions to disinherit his children, departs. But what he is going to do we are not told.

## XII

THIS is a sombre piece, but we are not now concerned with its merits or its sombre qualities: we are concerned only with the way in which it is constructed.

In the preliminary description of the office of Messrs Devizes, Devizes & Devizes, we find a sentence or two which reveal the unique knowledge Sir James Barrie has of stage-craft:

“The only thing essential to the room, save the two men sitting in it, is a framed engraving on the wall of Queen Victoria, which dates sufficiently the opening scene, and will be changed presently to King Edward: afterwards to King George, to indicate the passing of time. No other alteration is called for.”

Sir James has here written a play covering thirty years of time, during which the middle-aged grow senile and the young grow middle-aged. An inexpert dramatist would have invented great changes of scene and furniture to denote these passages of time, but Sir James, with that economy which men of genius more than ordinary men understand, realises that the whole of this lapse of time can be suggested to the audience by merely substituting the portrait of one monarch for another. Consider the swiftness with which the altera-

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tions from scene to scene can be made. A single scene-shifter in a few moments can substitute the portrait of King Edward for the portrait of Queen Victoria, and, in the third scene, the portrait of King George for that of King Edward. These portraits will probably catch the eyes of the audience the moment the curtain rises, and there is no need to alter anything else on the stage, because the change of portraits will convey to the minds of the audience all that the dramatist wishes to make known concerning the lapse of time.<sup>1</sup> It is improbable that anyone in the audience will observe that the change of portraits is the only change that has been made in the scene: the audience will have been imaginatively convinced of great changes by the mere substitution of one picture for another.

<sup>1</sup> I am referring, of course, only to the "setting." The lapse of time is also suggested in the appearance of the characters.

### XIII

Now observe the construction of the play itself. I have quoted the passage from the first scene in which the clerk, Surtees, informs the elder Mr Devizes that he is a doomed man. One might fairly ask oneself why Sir James ends his first scene with this seemingly irrelevant conversation. What has it got to do with the play? Is it not a piece of padding? Careless examination leads to the conclusion that the conversation *is* a piece of padding, but that it is necessary padding; but complete and careful examination shows us that the padding has most skilfully been caught into the texture of the play and is essential to it.

Why is it necessary padding? The reader will observe that three of the characters in the first scene, Mr and Mrs Ross and young Mr Devizes, have to appear in the second scene, which takes place twenty years after the date of the first one. Now, the actors and the actress who perform these parts must make changes of clothing and changes of appearance, and the dramatist is presented with the great difficulty in a short play of finding time for them to make these changes. Let the reader remember that the play lasts for about thirty minutes, and that the intervals between the scenes are

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momentary. In a full-length play the intervals can be anything from seven to fifteen minutes, which provide the players with reasonable opportunities to make changes of costume and make-up. These interval-opportunities cannot possibly be given in a play of the length of *The Will*, and the dramatist, therefore, has to find some other way of providing time for his cast to make necessary changes. The first person to leave the stage in the first scene is young Mr Devizes, and he is the first person found on the stage in the second scene. He is twenty years older in the second scene than he was in the first—a sedater, greyer man. It is essential, therefore, that he shall leave the stage before either Mr or Mrs Ross, so that he may have ample time to alter his clothes and appearance; and this is arranged. Then Mrs Ross and her husband depart, and the conversation between old Mr Devizes and Surtees begins. Mrs Ross comes on the stage in the second scene before her husband. Here again we have an example of the masterly craft of Sir James Barrie. Both of these characters leave the stage simultaneously in the first scene, but it is easier for a woman, especially in modern plays, to change her costume than it is for a man, and the change of appearance between a young woman and a middle-aged one is not so very great that much alteration of make-up need be done. Therefore, Sir James needs to give less time to the actress who plays Mrs Ross than must be given to the actor who plays the part of her husband. It will be noticed by the

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reader of the play that the elder Mr Devizes does not appear in the second scene at all. It would, of course, be impossible for any actor still on the stage at the end of the first scene to appear a moment or two later in another scene looking twenty years older, and wearing different clothes. The elder Mr Devizes, therefore, is left out of the second scene in a perfectly plausible manner and is given plenty of time in which to make up his face so that he may look not only thirty years older than he was in the first scene, but have the manner and appearance of a man beginning to suffer from senility. In the last scene of all, the conversation which passed between the elder solicitor and Surtees in the first scene is woven into the texture of the play, and poignantly made an essential part of it. One may examine all of Sir James Barrie's plays in this manner, and discover in them evidence of extraordinary knowledge of the theatre and a remarkable gift for turning small mechanical devices into essential parts.<sup>1</sup> His stage directions are deftly done, and he sometimes suggests

<sup>1</sup> An interesting example of the way in which extremely skilful craftsmanship can be ruined by unintelligent direction is to be found in the film which was made out of Sir James Barrie's one-act play, *Half-an-Hour*. I shall not recapitulate the story of this piece. All that need be said about it is that the events are supposed to occur in thirty minutes. The story is dramatic, the action is exceedingly swift, and the entire play is constructed with great ingenuity. In the moving picture, the tale is lengthened to an intolerable extent. We are given a tedious account of the early life of the lady, an earl's daughter, and are informed that her father is impoverished and compelled to sell valuable pictures to a millionaire who is more eager to buy her than the pictures. The story, instead of being spread over half an hour, is spread over several years, and it is made desperately dull. When I saw the picture exhibited at Torquay I overheard two women complaining of it. One of them said, "It doesn't seem a bit like Barrie!" It didn't.

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the whole nature of a character in a few sentences. The following description of Charles, in *Rosalind*, does very definitely fix in the mind of the person who reads it a clear idea of what sort of young man Charles is:

"Public school (and the particular one) is written on his forehead, and almost nothing else; he has scarcely yet begun to surmise that anything else may be required. He is modest and clear-eyed, and would ring for his tub in Paradise; reputably athletic also, with an instant smile always in reserve for the antagonist who accidentally shins him."

Although his plays are admirably constructed, they do not depress the spectator with a sense of slick and lifeless mechanism. There is nothing of the jig-saw puzzle about Sir James's work. One does not feel about them as one sometimes feels about the plays of Sardou, that there is an intolerable amount of ingenuity to a very little humanity, though Sardou is a much more human author than many of his detractors will acknowledge him to be. A study of Sardou will be profitable to the aspiring dramatist if he will keep in mind that mechanics are a very subordinate part of drama, and that it is better to have something to say without knowing how to say it, than to have little to say and to say it very skilfully.

## XIV

I HAVE so far discussed dramatic technique in its least important details, and these are the only parts of a play about which it is possible to give definite instruction. The rest is almost entirely a matter for the dramatist himself to discover. It is nearly impossible to discourse in an instructive manner on the theme of the play, although it can be, and is, criticised after the author has expressed his mind in it. But no one can tell him *how* to think of his theme, which is the principal part of the play; nor can anyone tell him how to treat it, for the treatment of the theme is the author's personal contribution to it. The same theme will be treated very differently by Mr Shaw, Sir James Barrie, Sir Arthur Pinero, Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, Mr. Galsworthy, and Mr Somerset Maugham. Shakespeare took the story of *All's Well that Ends Well* from *The Decameron*, but his treatment of it is vastly different from Boccaccio's. The third important part of a play is its dialogue, and this, too, is so personal a matter that instruction is nearly impossible; but it is easier to give instruction about dialogue than about theme or treatment, though the apprentice author must remember that no one, but himself, can teach him how to *write* dialogue. The dialogue used by a dramatist is neither

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that used in ordinary life nor that which is called "literary"; it must seem like colloquial conversation and yet have some literary quality in it. If it has only the sound of the street it will be dull, disjointed, broken, full of repetitions, and inconclusive. If it has only the look of literature it will be lifeless, unnatural, stilted, and exhausting to hear. The aspiring dramatist may imagine, since a play consists chiefly of conversation such as people are supposed to use in everyday life, that he need only put down as faithfully as possible the speech he hears about him; but he will ruin his play if he does. Among contemporary authors who are too realistic in their dialogue are Mr Noel Coward and Lord Lathom. I suggest to the reader that the dialogue in the opening scene of the first act of Lord Lathom's comedy, *Wet Paint*,<sup>1</sup> is too close to the speech of daily life to be interesting to hear or read. Here it is:

ELSIE. And my dear—what do you think she had the cheek to tell me—but I put her in her place at once. What do you think I said—I said I may be old—but not so old that I cannot see—and what I see I don't like. (*She looks at FLORENCE, who has walked over to the mantelpiece and is drumming her foot.*) Florence, you aren't listening?

FLORENCE. Yes, I am, Elsie.

ELSIE. Then what am I talking about?

FLORENCE (*smiles*). Is that quite fair?

<sup>1</sup> *The Curtain Goes Up*. Three plays ("Wet Paint," "Tuppence Coloured," and "The Way You Look at It"), by the Earl of Lathom, London: Martin Secker. 7s. 6d. net.

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ELSIE. Florence dear—what is the matter?

FLORENCE. Nothing. Go on.

ELSIE. But you aren't interested.

FLORENCE. Not very.

ELSIE (*hurt at once*). It's very unlike you. Of course, if I'd known. . . .

FLORENCE. Don't be silly, Elsie.

ELSIE. I'm not silly. I'm hurt.

FLORENCE. Well, then, hurt. . . . Don't be hurt—I can't help it if chit-chat doesn't interest me this afternoon. (*She flings her hat off.*) The Lord knows I've got other things to think of. Bigger things. Things that have got to be—to be managed with finesse.

ELSIE. Oh! well. If I'm in the way.

FLORENCE. Oh! don't go on getting hurt—You're not in the least in the way yet—When you are I'll make it clear enough.

ELSIE. And I thought you loved me—And I'm so fond of you.

FLORENCE (*looks at her*). Are you?

ELSIE. Am I?—Really, Florence. I am hurt this time.

FLORENCE (*smiling*). Nonsense. So then you weren't the last time?

ELSIE (*nearly in tears*). What else can I do? (*Angrily*) Oh! what is the matter with you?

FLORENCE. A lot of things. But they can wait.

ELSIE (*disappointed*). Oh! (*Pause.*) Can't you tell me?

FLORENCE (*makes a face at her*). I don't know.

ELSIE (*interested at once*). Oh! do tell me—Oh!—well, if you can't. . . .

FLORENCE. I don't know. Oh! Lord! I've always had to decide for myself—I suppose I shall have to now.

ELSIE. You will—if you can't trust me.

FLORENCE. There you go again—hurt. I wonder how many

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times a day you feel hurt—and how many bruises you've got?

ELSIE. Then you can't trust me?

FLORENCE. You're just like a dog. Trust—and the moment it's paid for—you'll tell.

(ELSIE begins to make an interruption.)

Oh! what does it matter?

ELSIE. And you're keeping something from me?

FLORENCE. Perhaps—of course—just now you said you were fond of me. Well—I wonder how fond.

ELSIE (goes towards her). Darling Florence!

FLORENCE (impatiently). Oh! Yes. I know. Fond enough to go about with me. Yes. I grant you it takes some courage still—although I am so fashionable—so chic. But then, I'm useful. . . .

ELSIE. Really, Florence!

FLORENCE. Well, let's face it—I am—arent' I? And thanks to you I'm very nearly in Society.

ELSIE (hating it). Oh! Florence.

FLORENCE. Oh! I know the difference. Very nearly. And just now—one thing either way will matter very much. I know just where I am now. But I don't know where I shall be in a minute or two—that's it. To some people it wouldn't matter very much. But to me—it does. We all have a bee in our bonnet. I've got a perfect swarm in mine. (She moves and punches a cushion.) Oh! damn everything to-day. I've got to be careful and I don't want to be. Damn everything—and everybody. (She looks at ELSIE) Yes, and you too, Elsie.

ELSIE. I don't think I like you very much this afternoon, Florence. I don't know—but I have a feeling I don't.

This too realistic dialogue is not only dull to hear or read, but very difficult to learn, as the actors and ac-

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tresses found when they rehearsed Mr Noel Coward's comedy, *Home Chat*. Mr Coward stoutly defends his dialogue because of its fidelity to fact. Contemporary conversation, he insists, is composed of short sentences, impressionistic rather than detailed in their nature, and rapid in their delivery. We do not speak with the care or precision with which we write. We would bore everybody if we did. We make leaps and take short cuts in our conversation and are eager, too eager, in modern England to avoid any appearance of "high-falutin'," with the result that we are continually commonplace and banal and dull. Mr Coward contends that it is his business as a dramatist to reproduce this conversation as faithfully as he can. If he were to make his characters talk in the circumlocutory fashion beloved by Henry James, he would be false to the facts of their lives. That is true. But when an author, eager to discard the unrepresentative circumlocutions of Henry James, deliberately discards all decoration from his dialogue and reduces it to the bare mumbles which pass for conversation to-day, he endangers his existence as a dramatist. His business is not to *reproduce* everyday language, but to *represent* everyday language. Some tongue-tied people talk in the following fashion:

HE. 'Lo!

SHE. 'Lo!

HE. Where goin'?

SHE. Goin' walk!

HE. Ki come?

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SHE. Like!

HE. Ri'o!

(*They walk.*)

I cannot conceive of any conversation more deadly in its dullness than that, yet it is strictly faithful to the fact of many persons' conversation. The dramatist has to heighten and lengthen and deepen the common speech, and yet leave it seeming to be the common speech. Those who listen to it must be able to exclaim, "Yes, that's what they *wanted* to say and would have said if they had had the author's ability in expression!" Mr Coward has been faithful to fact in the following passages, but his fidelity has cost him the heavy price of our interest in what is said. The first passage is taken from the second act of *Home Chat*:

MRS EBONY. He ought to be horsewhipped.

MRS CHILHAM. There you go again.

MRS EBONY. An utter cad—to make love to a woman while her husband's away.

MRS CHILHAM. It would be worse taste to do it while he was there, wouldn't it?

MRS EBONY. It's infamous—the whole thing.

MRS. CHILHAM. Shall we sit down?

MRS EBONY. No.

MRS CHILHAM. Why not?

MRS EBONY. Because it looks silly.

MRS CHILHAM. No sillier than standing up.

MRS. EBONY. We're here to talk to this young man seriously.

MRS CHILHAM. Very well, Agnes.

MRS EBONY. And Janet?

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MRS CHILHAM. Janet isn't here.

MRS EBONY. She is.

MRS CHILHAM. She is not—it's not the sort of thing she'd do.

MRS EBONY. Janet's a dark horse—I've always known it.

MRS CHILHAM. How dare you, Agnes.

MRS EBONY. I shall never forgive her, all this abominable vulgarity.

The second passage is taken from the third act of *This Was A Man*:

EDWARD. Hullo, Evie!

EVELYN (*haltingly*). Edward—I—I've come to say good-bye.

EDWARD (*surprised*). Good-bye!

EVELYN. Yes, I came earlier this morning, but you were out.

EDWARD. But where on earth are you going?

EVELYN. Australia.

EDWARD. Why Australia?

EVELYN (*weakly*). I've always wanted to go to Australia.

EDWARD. What *do* you mean?

EVELYN. I mean I've got to go there on business.

EDWARD. It's very sudden, isn't it?

EVELYN. Yes. I had a wire from my brother.

EDWARD. I didn't know he was in Australia.

EVELYN. He isn't. He's in Cheltenham, but he sent me a wire saying I ought to go out there at once.

EDWARD. What's the matter with you, Evie?

EVELYN. Nothing.

EDWARD. You're not only telling me extremely fatuous lies, but you look like death.

EVELYN. They're not lies. I—

EDWARD. Don't be an ass. Have a drink?

EVELYN. No—I don't want a drink.

EDWARD. What's wrong?

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EVELYN. There's nothing wrong.

EDWARD. You'd better tell me, you know.

EVELYN. I want to tell you.

EDWARD. Come on, then.

EVELYN. I've got to tell you.

EDWARD. Out with it.

EVELYN. But I can't.

EDWARD. Surely that's rather silly.

EVELYN. I tried to shoot myself this morning.

EDWARD. You what!

EVELYN. Tried to shoot myself.

EDWARD (*alarmed*). In God's name, why?

EVELYN (*brokenly*). Oh, Edward!

EDWARD. Evie, what *has* happened?

EVELYN. I'm the filthiest cad in the world.

EDWARD. Don't be ridiculous.

EVELYN. Our friendship is over for ever.

EDWARD (*with irritation*). Do stop all this melodrama, Evie, and tell me what's the matter.

EVELYN. I've betrayed you utterly.

EDWARD (*in great astonishment*). Betrayed *me*?

EVELYN (*looking down*). Yes.

EDWARD. How?

EVELYN (*brokenly*). Carol!

EDWARD. Carol! Well, what about her?

EVELYN. Carol dined with me last night.

EDWARD. Oh, did she?

EVELYN. And—and—O my God!

(*He sinks into a chair by the table and leans his head on his arms.*)

EDWARD (*in amazement*). You don't seriously mean to tell me—

EVELYN (*in muffled tones*). Yes.

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EDWARD. You and Carol!

EVELYN. Yes.

EDWARD. This is too much!

(*He bursts out laughing.*)

EVELYN (*looking up astounded*). Edward!

EDWARD. I can't bear it.

(*He laughs louder.*)

EVELYN (*rising*). Edward—old man—please——

EDWARD (*helplessly*). It's unbelievable—incredible. Oh, dear!

EVELYN (*approaching him*). Edward—for God's sake!

EDWARD (*weakly*). Don't come near me! I shall be all right in  
a minute.

EVELYN (*with growing anger*). You must be mad.

EDWARD. I certainly feel very strange.

The dialogue continues in that style for pages and pages. The play, indeed, is composed of dialogue exactly of that sort. My conviction is that the failure of *This Was A Man* in New York was due to the quality of the dialogue. The best corrective to the belief that dialogue should be faithfully transcribed from actual conversation is a report of the talk actually to be heard in any drawing-room, in any club, in any assembly anywhere! Let the aspiring dramatist take down in shorthand the speeches he hears in any general discussion. A single experience of that sort will be sufficient to prove to him that the conversation of the majority of human beings is so desultory and dull that it is a marvel how anybody in this world can be induced to listen to anybody else. Very rarely do people complete a speech. They are interrupted, or they forget what

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they started to say, or they dart from one subject to another, leaving the first unfinished, or they have not sufficient personality to compel other people to listen to them to the end, with the result that the conversation drifts away from them, even when what they have to say is interesting. Ordinary conversation is full of half sentences and expressions such as "What I mean to say is . . . !" or "I think," or "You know." The most overworked phrase in English conversation is "Of course!" although ninety-nine times out of a hundred, when it is used, there is no "of course" about it. People excessively repeat themselves. Even people who are called brilliant conversationalists would suffer severe shocks if they were presented with verbatim reports of their talk. Mr Bernard Shaw, when he delivers a public speech (which may have been prepared) leaves a great number of his sentences unfinished, and is very easily diverted from the theme of his argument by the superfluity of his own ideas. Mr Shaw will sometimes begin to talk on one subject, and then, while he is talking of it, see another subject, so to speak, in his mind, and drop the first to talk about the second. That is a common fault among people of active mind. It leaves the talk a little loose and untidy. Oscar Wilde was reputed to rehearse his conversation and perhaps he did, but he must have exercised extraordinary ingenuity in bringing the discourse round to the point at which he could speak the sentences he had rehearsed. There must have been many occasions when [76]

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his sallies did not come off, and still more occasions when he bored people by repeating epigrams which they had heard many times before. The most pitiable person in the world is an author's wife who hears him being brilliant so often that she must frequently want to scream.

## X V

FAITHFUL report of talk, then, will not do. The young dramatist who strives to get down on paper the actual words which he hears spoken by his associates is making a profound mistake. He must select his conversation and he must not let it be uneconomically dispersed. If there are to be interruptions—as, indeed, there must be if the appearance of actual conversation is to be maintained—they must be relevant interruptions, and they must be made in such a way that the meaning of the person whose speech is interrupted is not lost. The dramatist is obliged, if there is to be any drama at all, to let his characters complete sentences and speeches which, in life, would probably never be free from interruption and might never be finished because of diversions made by other speakers. He must remember that he has a story to tell, and that he will either fail to tell it or cause the audience to lose interest in it, if he allows too many lifelike interruptions or diversions to take place. He has to go more directly towards his objective than the everyday conversationalist is allowed to go towards his. The conversation of his characters, too, has to bear another burden that is seldom borne by real conversations: it has to carry [78]

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the nature of the person who uses it. It is partly through their talk that the dramatist shows what sort of people his characters are. All their talk, therefore, must be selected and manipulated and trimmed. But in selecting and manipulating and trimming speech, he must guard against his second danger, which is that he may make it too literary, too like the talk in a book, too little like talk in daily life. The sentences must not be too well or prettily written: they must not be grammatical, and yet they must not be too ungrammatical. Very few people speak as the late Lindley Murray would have liked them to speak. We say "It's me," not "It's I." We say "Who does it belong to," instead of "To whom does it belong?" English people say "Aren't I?" though they would not dream of saying "I aren't" or "I are not." The now nearly obsolete "Ain't I?" was comparatively correct. The Irish never say "Aren't I?" They always say "Amn't I." Most of us take short-cuts in our conversation. We know that our meaning is plain to those with whom we are associated, and, therefore, we do not trouble to give it that grammatical clarity for which grammarians plead. But speech of that sort, when it is isolated from ordinary circumstances and put into a book or spoken on the stage, becomes curiously offensive to the eye or the ear; and the dramatist, therefore, has to solve this great problem of keeping the talk in his play agile, lively, lifelike, natural and yet with some artistic appearance about it.

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Ought speeches to be long, or ought they to be short? Many people, skilful in writing plays, maintain that brevity is the soul of drama. But it is undeniable that the long speeches employed by Mr Bernard Shaw in his plays are extremely effective. In *Saint Joan*, the Inquisitor delivers a great speech on heresy, which takes nearly ten minutes to speak. Mr John Galsworthy practices the short speech. Mr. Sacha Guitry will fill pages of his plays with speeches that are nearly monosyllabic. Mr Eugene O'Neill uses a lyrical utterance that is sometimes lengthy. He has even written a play, *The Emperor Jones*, which is mainly made up of terrified ejaculations by a single character. I have said that the dramatist, if he were faithfully to put down the conversations he hears about him, would produce something artless and dull, yet Chekhov very nearly makes a verbatim report of everyday, disjointed talk, and produces something which deeply impresses the mind. Brieux puts long speeches into the mouths of his characters. One spoken by a woman in *Maternity* fills more than a page of closely-printed type. Brieux writes dialogue which bears singularly little resemblance to everyday speech. Some of it reads and sounds as if it had been extracted from a Blue Book, and nearly all of it is stiff, and sometimes stilted, stuff. Yet Brieux succeeds in impressing his audience, chiefly, perhaps, because his theme is impressive in itself. Let the reader compare the following speeches, the first from Shakespeare's

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*Romeo and Juliet*, and the second from Mr John Galsworthy's *The Eldest Son*, and then ask himself which is the more effective. The passage from *Romeo and Juliet* is as follows:

ROMEO. She speaks!  
Oh, speak again, bright angel! for thou art  
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,  
As is a winged messenger of heaven  
Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes  
Of mortals, that fall back to gaze on him,  
When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds  
And sails upon the bosom of the air.

JULIET. Oh, Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?  
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;  
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,  
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

ROMEO (*aside*). Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

JULIET. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;  
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague,  
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor feet,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet;  
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,  
Retain that dear perfection which he owes  
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,  
And for that name, which is no part of thee,  
Take all myself.

The passage from Mr Galsworthy's play occurs at the end of the second scene of the first act.

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FREDA. Everybody will be pleased.

BILL. At what?

FREDA. When you marry her.

BILL. This is too bad.

FREDA. It's what always happens—even when it's not a gentleman.

BILL. That's enough!

FREDA. But I'm not like that girl down in the village. You needn't be afraid I'll say anything when—it comes. That's what I had to tell you.

BILL. What!

FREDA. *I can keep a secret.*

BILL. Do you mean this? (*She bows her head.*) Good God!

FREDA. Father brought me up not to whine. Like the puppies when they hold them up by their tails. (*With a sudden break in her voice.*) Oh! Bill!

BILL (*with his head down seizing her hands*). Freda! (*He breaks away from her towards the fire.*) Good God!

(*She stands looking at him, then quietly slips away by the door under the staircase. BILL turns to speak to her and sees that she has gone. He walks up to the fireplace, and grips the mantelpiece.*)

BILL. By Jove! This is . . . !

*The curtain falls*

Now examine these speeches. Those spoken by Romeo and Juliet express high and lovely emotion in exquisite language. Observe what a lengthy sentence is the one spoken by Romeo, and beginning, "Oh, speak again, bright angel!" The actor who has to deliver these lines will ruin them if he pauses frequently to take breath. The speech depends for much of its

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effect on the power of the actor to say it with few pauses. It must be said swiftly, but it must not be gabbled. The audience must not hear Romeo taking a deep breath, then starting off in terror lest he should expel it before he has reached the last word of the speech. This is not an easy speech to deliver so that it seems to be the speech of an ordinary romantic young man, yet how extraordinarily Shakespeare contrives to make it appear as if it were. Mr Galsworthy's lines are spoken in circumstances of emotional intensity that is even greater than the intensity with which Shakespeare's lovers speak; for disaster, which has not yet darkened the lives of Romeo and Juliet, has deeply darkened the lives of Freda and Bill: Freda is about to have a child, and Bill is its father. We have to allow for the differences between an Elizabethan poetic play and a modern prose one; but, making all these allowances, how strangely the Shakespearean lines contrast with the close, clipped, almost inarticulate speeches made by Mr Galsworthy's lovers. Shakespeare's lines seem less true to life than Mr Galsworthy's, for young lovers rarely express their feelings in blank verse, but Mr Galsworthy's lines are less representative of life than Shakespeare's, and when we remember the emotion implicit in the situations, we are obliged to believe that the language put into the mouths of Romeo and Juliet is truer to the whole of life than the language put into the mouths of Bill and Freda by Mr Galsworthy. There may be, and probably

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will be, dispute about this, and those who take sides in the argument will become so partisan in their advocacy that they will allow no merit to their opponents. The point here is not that one style is better than another: poetic than prose; but that dialogue is most truly lifelike when it most truly corresponds to the emotional state of those who use it. The words spoken by Shakespeare's young lovers express what is in their minds and hearts more certainly than the words spoken by Mr Galsworthy's lovers express what is in theirs. The style of Shakespeare is so dissimilar from that of Mr Galsworthy, not merely in the shape of the speech but in the spirit of it, that one might fairly conclude that, if the style of one be right, the style of the other must be wrong; but to make such an assumption would be a mistake. There is not one manner: there are many manners; and each dramatist must find out for himself what is the manner most suitable to him. Some authors can manipulate long sentences; others cannot; and in the end the dramatist must write very much in the way in which he himself talks, except that the dialogue he puts on paper must be more shapely than the dialogue he uses in his ordinary conversation. It is better, perhaps, to make faithful reports of dull speech than it is to write dialogue entirely literary in form, because the first sort does at least suggest life, whereas the latter suggests only contrivance: but the born dramatist uses a dialogue which is at once loose and shapely, natural and [84]

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literary, sounding like the street and looking like literature, and full of character and movement. He had better be too realistic than too literary. There are passages of dialogue in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* which, although they are accepted in the novel, would not be accepted on the stage. Some of these passages are too elaborate even for the novel. There is stiffness in them, they diverge too markedly from the conversation of reality, and they certainly invest Jude and Sue with the appearance of prigs, which, perhaps, was Hardy's intention; but they do not cause the reader any serious discomfort, nor do they reduce the stature of the novel or the poignancy of the story. Heard on the stage, however, these passages would seriously disturb the audience, which would not be able to rid itself of the feeling that the speeches were unreal, too set, too well made, too priggish. An audience might even assure itself that the persons in the plight in which Jude and Sue were would not speak in that careful, precise, and bookish way. Jude and Sue are talking about their marriage. Jude is anxious that he and she should be married immediately, but Sue, the mother of the modern neurotic heroine, cannot make up her mind either to be married or not to be married. She feels that marriage is "a vulgar institution—a sort of trap to catch a man," and she is anxious to leave Jude free. Here are some passages from her conversation with Jude. They appear in Book V, Chapter III:

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"Sue, you seem when you are like this to be one of the women of some grand old civilisation, whom I used to read about in my bygone, wasted, classical days, rather than a denizen of a mere Christian country. I almost expect you to say at these times that you have just been talking to some friend whom you met in the Via Sacra, about the latest news of Octavia or Livia; or have been listening to Aspasia's eloquence, or have been watching Praxiteles chiselling away at his latest Venus, while Phryne made complaint that she was tired of posing. . . ."

This speech, made by Jude, has the sound and the appearance of a passage in an essay, rather than the sound and the appearance of a remark made by a young monumental mason to a young elementary school-teacher. One might, indeed, assert that young people of their sort would probably parade their learning in their conversation, and, no doubt, they did, but did they do it quite in that way? One is prepared to lieve that they did, in a novel, but no one would believe that they did, in a play. Sue, reporting to Jude something said to her by Arabella, says:

"'Jude, do you think that when you *must* have me with you by law, we shall be so happy as we are now? The men and women of our family are very generous when everything depends upon their goodwill, but they always kick against compulsion. Don't you dread the attitude that insensibly arises out of legal obligation? Don't you think it is destructive to a passion whose essence is its gratuitousness?'

"'Upon my word, love, you are beginning to frighten me, too, with all this foreboding! Well, let's go back and think it over.'

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"Her face brightened. 'Yes . . . so we will!' said she. And they turned from the clerk's door, Sue taking his arm and murmuring as they walked on homeward:

'Can you keep the bee from ranging,  
Or the ring-dove's neck from changing?  
No! Nor fetter'd love. . . .'"

This dialogue would sound too rhetorical and laboured in the theatre, as would another passage from a speech spoken by Jude:

" . . . The beggarly question of parentage . . . what is it after all? What does it matter, when you come to think of it, whether a child is yours by blood or not? All the little ones of our time are collectively the children of us adults of the time, and entitled to our general care. That excessive regard of parents for their own children, and their dislike of other people's, is, like class-feeling, patriotism, save-your-own-soulism, and other virtues, a mean exclusiveness at bottom."

The dramatist dare not make his characters talk to each other in that style. He has to loosen their conversation, to make it more colloquial than Hardy's, and, therefore, nearer to the speech of reality. I am not suggesting that Jude and Sue did not say these things to each other, but merely that they did not say them so precisely and with so much form as Hardy makes them speak. Even Mr Shaw, who makes the fewest possible concessions to his audience, when he puts long, formal speeches into the mouths of his characters, as, for example, the speech spoken by the Inquisitor in *Saint Joan*, does so on a formal occasion. The speeches

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in *Back to Methuselah* are not bookish in the sense that those of Jude and Sue are, though they are much longer than theirs. I have insisted at this length on dialogue, because the aspiring dramatist must learn the difference between literary and dramatic dialogue if he is to achieve distinction in the theatre.

## XVI

It must be obvious that I cannot tell anyone how to think of a theme. Heaven alone can do that. It ought to be equally obvious that neither I nor anyone else can tell the dramatist how to *treat* the theme. Treatment is the dramatist's personal contribution to the theme. Tell a story to several dramatists, and each of them, when he comes to make a play out of it, will treat it in his own way. Mr Bernard Shaw and the late Stanley Houghton used almost identically the same theme in *Over-Ruled* (Mr Shaw's piece) and *Fancy Free* (Stanley Houghton's); but the treatment of it is as different as Houghton was from Mr Shaw. Houghton in *Hindle Wakes*, Mr Galsworthy in *The Eldest Son*, and I in *The Magnanimous Lover*, each unaware of what the others were doing, used the same theme in remarkably dissimilar ways. I remember meeting Mr Somerset Maugham one afternoon, and telling him the story of a play I had just written. He listened to me with a patience that was heroic, and then said, "That's the story of my play, *The Constant Wife*, which is to be produced next week!" Collapse of me! This incident causes me to remark that charges of plagiarism, in my experience, nearly always turn out

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to be unfounded. Certain themes are in the air, and it is inevitable that they should occur simultaneously in several minds. There is no copyright in ideas. The idea of sex-equality, for example, inspires a number of people to wonder what would be the result of equality in certain circumstances. When that happens, all that can be said is that the author whose work was done first was lucky. Other charges of plagiarism are generally silly. An American author, Mr Sidney Howard, was accused of plagiarising his play, *They Knew What They Wanted*, from another American author. The charge appeared to be based on the fact that in both plays an old man married a young wife, who subsequently fell in love with a young man. I do not know who was the original author of that story, but I suspect that he was closely related to Adam. The late Basil MacDonald Hastings made a childless woman, Mrs Bretherton, play with dolls in *The Tide* exactly as Ibsen made Mrs Solness in *The Master Builder* play with them. When the dramatic critic of the *Westminster Gazette* drew his attention to the fact, Mr Hastings replied that he had neither seen nor read Ibsen's play and could not account for the apparent plagiarism.

There can, then, be no instruction on this point. Instruction, indeed, of any sort on the theme must be mainly negative and vague. I say to myself, "At all events, the theme must be plausible. The author must not contradict himself! . . ." And immediately I re-

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member *Hamlet*, in which there are several implausible and even contradictory situations. Why, for example, is Ophelia denied Christian burial? Because she committed suicide? But there is an explicit account of Ophelia's death from which it clearly appears that she was accidentally drowned. Queen Gertrude says:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,  
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;  
There with fantastic garlands did she come  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:  
There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds  
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And, mermaid-like, a while they bore her up:  
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element: but long it could not be,  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death.

One might say that Gertrude would hardly have paused in the announcement of Ophelia's death to discourse on the nomenclature of wildflowers, but one cannot truthfully say that when the announcement is made there is any doubt about the manner of the death. Even if there were, the conversation between

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the gravediggers in the next scene shows that the legal authorities had no doubt about it. "The crowner hath sat on her," says the Second Gravedigger, "and finds it Christian burial." Yet, when the body of Ophelia is brought for burial, Hamlet, beholding the procession, is able to exclaim:

who is this they follow?  
And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken  
The corse they follow did with desperate hand  
Fordo its own life,

and his suspicion is soon confirmed, for the priest informs Laertes that:

Her obsequies have been as far enlarged  
As we have warranty: her death was doubtful;  
And, but that great command o'ersways the order,  
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged  
Till the last trumpet; for charitable prayers,  
Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her:  
Yet here she is allow'd her virgin crants,  
Her maiden strewments and the bringing home  
Of bell and burial.

LAERTES. Must there no more be done?

PRIEST. No more be done:

We should profane the service of the dead  
To sing a requiem and such rest to her  
As to peace-parted souls.

The Church, clearly, has made up its mind, in defiance of the facts, that Ophelia has destroyed herself: this is an astonishing contradiction in theme for an [92].

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author to make. It is all the more astounding, because the contradiction follows so pat on the assertion. At the end of the fourth act Gertrude has described the drowning of Ophelia. At the beginning of the fifth act the gravedigger tells his companion that a coroner's jury had returned a verdict of accidental drowning. Yet a few minutes later, in the same scene in which the gravediggers discourse on the inquest, the priest informs Laertes that "her death was doubtful" and, therefore, the burial rites must be "maimed." No one disputes his assertion. Gertrude herself does not tell him that Ophelia was accidentally drowned. The assertion is accepted without protest. There is another improbability in this scene. Horatio, who knew of Ophelia's madness and was actually at the Court when she was drowned, hurries off to meet Hamlet on his return to Denmark from England. Horatio knows that Hamlet is in love with Ophelia, and one would imagine that his first news to the prince would be of her malady and her death. Yet Horatio does not say one word to Hamlet about her, not even when the body is brought to burial; and it is not until Laertes cries out against the "churlish priest" that the prince realises whose body is in the coffin.

## XVII

HERE are improbabilities that might seem sufficient to wreck a play—there are others in *Hamlet*—yet they have not wrecked Shakespeare's play. It will not do, then, to assert that an author must be careful to preserve the probabilities, although one may safely assert that he should not wantonly outrage them. Shakespeare certainly seems to act in a wanton manner over Ophelia's dead body; but he does so in order that he may make a most effective theatrical scene, and he makes the audience forget the improbabilities and contradictions by the strength of his craftsmanship. Shakespeare repeatedly contradicted his theme and dealt in improbable situations, nor did he hesitate to violate historical facts. The second part of *King Henry IV* is full of false statements. *The Merchant of Venice* is improbable from start to finish. It may be said of him that whenever there was a law of the drama to be broken he broke it. His career and his eminence as a dramatist, indeed, render every person who sets out to instruct people in the way in which plays should be written entirely futile. He is the most brilliant and amazing proof of the fact that a man who has a flair for the theatre can violate with impunity every principle of his

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profession. A dramatist to-day would have difficulty in persuading an audience to accept some of the contradictions and improbabilities that Shakespeare used, but even to-day a dramatist need not be afraid to strain the credulity of his audience. William Archer had a poor opinion of the Elizabethan and Restoration authors. In his book, *The Old Drama and the New*, he complained of the puerility of the plots in Elizabethan plays. He could barely contain himself when he recounted the story of Ben Jonson's *Volpone, the Fox*. It is true that the plots of these plays are nearly always puerile, but Archer's choice of *Volpone, the Fox*, as an example of this puerility was unfortunate. "Men of reputed wealth," he wrote, "have doubtless lived more or less comfortably for years on their relatives' lively sense of favours to come; but they have never coined it to the tune of millions and lived riotously upon it. The case of Volpone, in short, does not exist in nature. It is a figment of crude cynicism." I reminded him of the fact that Madame Humbert, less than thirty years ago, lived riotously to the tune of millions on the lively sense of favours to come of persons who were not her relatives at all, but strangers, and, many of them, persons generally considered to be astute men of business and affairs. There were actually people who said she was a swindler; but she contrived, nevertheless, to live for years in luxury on the money given to her by intelligent people, merely because they believed that she had some wonderful secret locked up

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in a safe. She was no figment of crude cynicism, but a very plain and palpable fact. The dramatist, therefore, need not be excessively perturbed because the story he has to tell seems improbable. Life may at any moment furnish him with confirmation of it. But he should be as plausible as he possibly can.

## XVIII

NOR need he be depressed if his play, when it is written, is fiercely criticised. Archer, who was a close friend of Mr Bernard Shaw, publicly appealed to Mr Shaw, after the first performance of *Widowers' Houses*, to give up all hope of writing plays, because he obviously had no talent for the job! Archer, to the day of his death, remained dubious about Mr Shaw's abilities as a dramatist; and he was totally unable to find any merit in Chekhov. He may have been right, but one has to add that many persons dissent from his belief. He was a stout upholder of the Sardou school of dramatists: he liked his plays to be well made. Chekhov did not belong to that school, nor does Mr Shaw. Their plays are not well made in the sense in which Scribe used the expression. In Archer's opinion, therefore, their plays were not plays at all. When doctors so profoundly disagree, the patient may resolve to die as quietly as he can, or leave himself in the hands of Nature. He may, indeed, die while the doctors are wrangling round his bed; but he may recover and be out of the sick-room and receiving the congratulations of his friends before the doctors have decided (*a*) to operate on him, (*b*) to dose him lavishly

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with medicine, or (*c*) to give him up. He will probably do well to ignore some of their advice and to accept their decisions with reluctance. He will find in the end that every dramatist makes his own technique. Mr Ellis Roberts, in the Introduction to his fine translation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, commenting on the difference between the Classical and the Romantic tradition, says:

"Let me insist, too, that the classical tradition, in creative or critical work, was unknown to the classical age. It was an invention of France. Aristotle had no thought of drawing up rules for the drama, or for literature generally, apart from the facts; only his facts were fewer and covered less space than do ours, and so his criticism is more rigid. But it is based on masterpieces: the Greek masterpieces, unlike the French, were not written to rule—the rules were merely so many statements of their observed excellence. That is the real reason why some of us who love Sophocles do not think he is more akin to Racine than to Shakespeare; and feel the harmony of *The Tempest* to be more Hellenic than the passion of *Phedre*. Shakespeare, as Sophocles, expressed his temperament by the rules that suited him; Corneille and Racine expressed theirs by rules that embodied not their choice but their traditions. They did not find a form that appealed to them. They followed a monarch whom they feared to disobey."

It may, and not unfairly, be said that "statements of" the "observed excellence" of masterpieces acquire the authority of rules, but to say that Aristotle's dicta on drama must be treated with the respect due to final revelation is to rob the drama of its fluidity and to

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make it a fixed form, capable of being used by any educated person who faithfully follows the formula. Mr Ellis Roberts is right when he implies his preference for the author who expresses his temperament by the rules that suit him; and it frequently happens that he is obliged to make those rules for himself. Mr Shaw was told that his plays were “not plays” when he first set himself to assault the English stage. Even now, when his renown is world-wide, gentlemen arise and assert with all the pomposity of arid professors that he is “not a dramatist.” They would have said the same of Shakespeare had they been contemporary with him, nor could Sophocles have hoped, had they lived in his time, to escape from their censure. Yet the world sits subdued in the society of Sophocles and Shakespeare and Shaw, and is remarkably indifferent to the opinions of the pompous.

## XIX

ACTION in drama causes more confusion in the minds of apprentice authors than, perhaps, any other part of it. A dramatist, when he talks of action, does not mean bustle or mere physical movement: he means development and growth. There are people who fondly imagine that when we speak of action in a play, we mean that a character rises from one seat and sits upon another. They think that there is movement in a play when people enter or go out. When you speak of action to them, they immediately imagine that you mean *doing things*. Thus, when a character sits on his hat or falls over a rug, they say to themselves, "That is action. This is movement!"

They seldom realise that action and movement may be entirely intellectual, and will describe Mr Shaw's *Getting Married* as actionless, although it is full of mental activity. There is movement in a play when a character grows before your eyes, but that growth may be, and often is, manifested not in what the character *does*, but in what he *says*. A play may contain characters who are never still, and yet there is not a ha'porth of action in the entire piece. In the first version of Mr Geoffrey Moss's play, *Sweet Pepper*, the author occu-

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pied an hour with his first act, dividing it into three scenes which had almost no movement at all in them, unless we are to acknowledge that the activities of the scene-shifters are action. At the end of that act we had learnt (*a*) that the heroine had lost her employment with the British Mission in Austria, (*b*) that she might be able to get work with an American Mission, and (*c*) that she was going to a party in a borrowed frock. We actually had a whole scene in which the young lady robed herself "off" in this frock. That was all. Yet everybody in the play was bobbing on and off the stage, out of one scene into another, and generally displaying agility. Action is of several sorts. It may consist of what the people do; it may consist of what they say; it may consist of what they think. There are active words and inactive words, and active thoughts and inactive thoughts, and the activity lies in their power to carry the play forward from one state of being to another. Mr Granville-Barker's play, *The Madras House*, has two active acts and two inactive acts. Acts one and two are as full of activity as any dramatist could wish them to be, but acts three and four stand still.

When the various Huxtables come in, one after the other, in the first act and say, "You'll stay to lunch!" there is definite movement of thought in the mind of the audience. The first Huxtable who makes the remark has no effect on the audience. The second Huxtable has a little. The third Huxtable excites laughter,

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and the fourth has every person in the audience thinking, "Good Heavens, that's what these Huxtables are like—always echoing each other, repeating stale phrases! . . ." Similarly, there is growth and movement as the Huxtables tell their guests that the Crystal Palace can be seen from their garden-window. This activity, this movement, this growth is a matter not only of words, but of repeated words. It is the *growing* perception of the audience that all the Huxtables say the same thing, which is the action.

In the second act the action takes a different turn. Here it consists of the differences of character. Mr Granville-Barker sets several totally dissimilar women in the same room, letting them revolve round one fact, the impending and unlawful maternity of one of them, and astoundingly there is growth, movement, action. Then he abandons action altogether, and in the third and fourth acts the audience is treated to lengthy arguments of much ability, but without any sort of progression. The thoughts turn round and round and go nowhere. At the end we are left with Philip and Jessica Madras just talking. We know no more about them than we knew at the beginning of the play, though they cannot keep their tongues quiet; and, to be candid, we are just a trifle bored by them.

Mr Shaw has an astounding capacity for making words work, but he is sometimes capricious and insists on holding them down. The result is that he unnecessarily lengthens his plays. If the epilogue to *Saint Joan*

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were omitted we should lose from the play some very beautiful passages, but should we lose anything that is not contained in the final sentences of the play itself? Mr Shaw says that he cannot let his audience go out of the theatre in the belief that the end of Joan was a charred body. We might reply to him that even the most ignorant of us brings a little knowledge of her into the theatre, but we could better reply that he has told us all that our imagination needs in the Earl of Warwick's reply to the executioner, who comes from the pyre and says, "Well, that's the end of her!" Warwick, wiser than that grimy man, murmurs, "I wonder!" Is there any addition needed to that? Does not the mind leap forward as Warwick speaks? Here is activity, movement, growth, whatever you call it, and no more is required. In two words Mr Shaw makes Warwick say all that Mr Shaw subsequently says in the epilogue. We may justly complain that he does not trust us, but more justly still may we complain that he does not trust himself. Fore sometimes activity comes when a man is trying, not to say as much as possible, but to say as little as possible.

The apprentice author may impede his action by words, and his first lesson in craftsmanship, therefore, must be in the hard and sometimes heartrending craft of "cutting." The young dramatist is always reluctant to "cut" his lines: the experienced dramatist is always ready to do so. Mr Henry Arthur Jones once informed me that he "cut" his plays so closely that, after he had

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delivered his manuscript to the manager, there was no need to "cut" another word; but Mr Jones is unique in that respect. All authors who understand their business realise that the play, as written, cannot be right for performance until its dialogue has been subjected to the test of speech and acting; and some of them have attempted in the past to distinguish between dialogue in the printed version of the play and dialogue in the acted version by publishing in brackets the passages which were "cut" in performance. They thus authorise the "cutting" of these passages, not because they are objectionable, but because, although they read well enough, they suspend the action in performance and cause the play to drag. Another consequence of excessive wordiness is that the "snap" or drama is taken out of a scene by it. There is a perfect example of this fault in William Archer's *The Green Goddess*. At the end of the third act, after the Raja of Rukh has killed Major Crespin, some soldiers rush in and tell him that Dr Traherne and Major Crespin, earlier in the scene, had thrown his valet through the window. The scene here is very intense and dramatic. Verbosity of any sort will injure it. The Raja goes to the window and looks out to where, a hundred feet below on jagged rocks, the body of his valet lies. Then he says:

RAJA (*returning to the centre*). Tut, tut—most inconvenient.  
And foolish on your part—for now, if my brother should be reprieved, we cannot hear of it. (*Looks at the message re-*

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*flectively.)* Otherwise, the situation remains unchanged. We adhere to our programme for to-morrow. The Major has only a few hours' start of you.

*Curtain.*

In performance the whole of that speech was "cut" except the words, "The situation remains unchanged. We adhere to our programme for to-morrow." The result was that the intensity of the scene was maintained, and the curtain fell on a highly dramatic situation. The dramatic effect would have been diminished if the whole of Archer's text had been used.

Some of the dramatic critics were upset by what they called the "melodrama" of this play. Mr Herbert Farjeon, for example, was seriously annoyed because the young officer from the rescue party, when he saw that Dr Traherne and Mrs Crespin were not dead, exclaimed, "Thank God, we're in time!" That is not what he says in the printed play, but it was said in performance. (There seems to have been some revision of speeches at this point, for one very effective line, given in the book to the Raja, was spoken, in performance, by the rescuing officer. Now, "Thank God, we're in time!" is precisely what that young flight-lieutenant would have said if the incident had occurred in life. I feel fairly certain that if Mr Farjeon himself had been the rescuing officer, he would have said, "Thank God, we're in time!" A full-blooded rationalist, would, no doubt, have exclaimed, "Thank Darwin, we're in time!" or "Glory be to Einstein, you're

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not dead!" or "Oh Newton be thanked, we're not too late!" The "line" of which Mr Farjeon complains was not, however, written by William Archer, who made the officer say, "I'm glad we're in time!" What a "line" to put into the mouth of a man who has flown across the Himalayas and come down out of the heavens only just in time to save a man and a woman from a violent death! The actors were right when they insisted that the words should be "Thank God, we're in time!" In all moments of excitement and danger and great strain we use the commonest terms of melodrama. The father, in a rage with his daughter because she proposes to become an actress, nearly always assures her that he would prefer to see her stretched in her coffin than alive on the stage. Our instinct when we are told of disaster is to say, "My God, how awful!" rather than, "Dear me, how dreadful!" or "What a very sad calamity!" In the agonies of war, when men must kill or be killed, their speech is a terrible blend of blasphemies and holy names, and the wounded soldier may expire with an oath on his lips. We need not suppose that God will be hard on him for that.

## XX

THE author should not refuse to "cut" a "line" merely because the actor who asks for the "cut" cannot explain why he considers it to be unspeakable. Actors are seldom articulate men, but their instincts are sound, and some authors of eminence make a practice of "cutting" all "lines" which are said by actors to be unspeakable, even when they themselves feel that they are perfectly speakable. That is a sacrificial act which seems to me to be excessive, for an actor will sometimes, although he does not definitely say so, ask for a "line" to be "cut" merely to make his part better and without regard to the general balance of the play. Nevertheless, the actor's request should not be disregarded: it may be a sound request.

## XXI

THE apprentice author must remember that a situation which is highly effective in one play may be totally ineffective in another, because of a purely mechanical alteration in the circumstances. Sir Arthur Pinero, a superb craftsman with an astounding sense of the theatre, made an immense effect on his audiences when, in the third act of *The Gay Lord Quex*, he caused Sophy Fullgarney to rouse the house by pulling at a bell-rope in the bedroom. Lord Quex had threatened that, if she would not consent to hold her tongue about his encounter with his discarded mistress, he would pretend that he and she were lovers. Sophy, eager to save her young friend from marriage with a man she does not love, hesitates for a moment or two while she considers this threat to her reputation. Then, resolving to sacrifice herself, she rushes to the old-fashioned bell-rope and pulls it vigorously. Immediately there is a loud clangour, immensely dramatic in its effect on the audience, and, presently, people come hurrying to the room. The rest of the scene need not be described. Mr Frederick Lonsdale, in his play, *The Last of Mrs Cheyney*, uses a similar situation. A woman thief is caught in a bedroom by a

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man who offers her exposure and imprisonment as the alternative to immediate seduction. After a brief pause for thought, she, too, goes to the bell and rings it, but the bell here is a modern electric bell, not an old-fashioned lump of clangling metal with a rope dangling from it, and the drama which Sir Arthur discovered in his bell was not in Mr Lonsdale's. One instantly asked oneself where Mr Lonsdale's bell sounded: in a maid's room or the servants' hall, where?; and was astonished when, after it had been rung once at a late hour of the night, various members of the house-party appeared, although a second's thought convinced one that they could not possibly have heard the bell. That is a very interesting example of the way in which a dramatic situation can be ruined by a mere alteration in the mechanical conveniences of organised society.

There is another sort of mechanical device which is ruinous to a play, the end or destiny of a character which is too deliberately arranged by the author. Mr Galsworthy affords us an example of the contrived, rather than the natural, end of a character in *The Fugitive*, when he brings Clare Dedmond to a suicide's death in a restaurant in which she has attempted to be a prostitute. I have examined this play at length in a book called *Some Impressions of My Elders* and will not repeat the examination here, but another example of a contrived and unconvincing end can be found in Mr John Masefield's *The Tragedy of Nan*.

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A great tragedy resolves our doubts. It leaves us with a sense of finality in affairs and prevents us from raising notes of interrogation or making speculations of what would have happened if this or that had been differently ordained. Such a play may cause us to feel pain, but it must fill us with pride; and if the pain with which we depart from its performance is greater than the pride with which it fortifies us, then we may be sure that there is some base material among the elements of which it is composed. We do not speculate on what would have been the development of Hamlet had the prince become reconciled to Claudius, because we feel instinctively that the end of the play made by Shakespeare is the only possible end. A tragic figure goes to his destiny with unfaltering feet not because he is the victim of an indifferent deity, but because a noble nature must react in a particular manner to particular circumstances; and the death of such a man, though it may bring grief to us, must also inspire us so that in a little while we forget our grief and remember only our great pride.

I do not feel the sense of finality in the affairs of Nan Hardwick. Is hers a contrived or inevitable tragedy? Has Mr Masefield wilfully sentenced Nan to death, or has her own nature made it impossible for her to come to terms with a hateful existence? Was there ever a woman so compounded of malignancy as Mrs Pargetter? Could a mean-souled and changeable lover like Dick Gurvil ever hope to rouse [110]

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so much beauty of devotion in a pure and passionate girl like Nan, or display such exalted love for her as he manifests in the second act? Could an ordinarily decent lad be so swiftly and easily diverted from his sweetheart as Gurvil was diverted from Nan by Mrs Pargetter? Was there ever in the world a group of people so destitute of common kindness and understanding as the group of people with whom Nan had to live? . . . When I put these questions to myself I am unable to answer them in such a way as to establish the veracity of Mr Masefield's work. He seems to me not only to bar Nan's way of escape from her prison, but actually to insist on pushing her back into it. "I won't let you out of this," he seems to say to her, "until the tide comes in! . . ." Observe how careful he is to prevent William Pargetter, the one person with a particle of kindness for Nan in his nature, from directly asking her whether or not she broke his Toby-jug. Mrs Pargetter has caused him to imagine that it was broken by Nan and not by Jenny. "She will tell you about it," Mrs Pargetter says, and he waits for her to do so, but naturally, since she is ignorant of the fact that it is broken, she does not mention the matter:

PAR. (*rising*). 'Aven't you something to tell me?

NAN. No! No!

PAR. (*grimly*). I thought you 'ad. (*Turning.*)

NAN. Oh, uncle! Do 'ee.

PAR. (*going*). I didn't think it of you.

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NAN. Uncle!

PAR. I didn't think it. (*Exit.*)

I have difficulty in believing that a simple-minded and direct man, such as Pargetter is shown to be, would question a girl in this obscure and tortuous fashion, or that she would not ask him to be more explicit. Would he not have said to her, “ ‘Ow did you come for to break my Toby?’” or some similar sentence which would have made his grievance against her plain? I think he would, but he does not do so, because Mr Masefield wishes to alienate him from Nan, and cannot cause the alienation without a misunderstanding that is more appropriate to farce or sentimental comedy than to tragedy. There is much in the play that is on a par with that example of wilful contrivance. Nan herself speaks with two tongues, the tongue of a young and innocent country girl and the tongue of a woman of much knowledge and experience. “There be three times, Dick,” she says to Gurvil in the last act, “when no woman can speak. Beautiful times! When ’er ’ears ’er lover, and when ’er gives ’erself, and when ’er little one is born!” How does Nan, a young country girl, come to speak in this fashion? Out of what experience has she acquired this knowledge? Wisdom comes from high imagination or from suffering or from experience. In which of these ways has Nan possessed herself of her threefold knowledge? There is nothing in the play to make us feel that it came to her through her mind, and we know

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that, although she has heard her lover, she has not given herself to him nor borne him a child. The voice, indeed, is the voice of Nan, but the words were invented for her by Mr Masefield. When the distracted girl stabs her faithless lover, we feel that the play was written with that end in view, that Mr Masefield first thought of a violent death and then invented circumstances to bring it about.

## X X I I

THE reader may, at this point, inquire whether the whole of what has been written in this book may not be rendered useless by a new development in craftsmanship. What effect, he may demand, will what is called Expressionism have upon the play? Nothing, he may complain, has been said about Mr Gordon Craig's theories on theatre-craft. It is not my business to discuss Mr Craig's beliefs, especially as I do not accept them and am now concerned solely with the craft of the playwright. The Expressionist is a reactionary, pretentiously using the obsolete form of the Morality authors. Mr George Jean Nathan, in his book, *Art of the Night*, deals very severely, but fairly, with these authors:

"For all their pretence to the contrary, elaborately enunciated in tracts that seek to conceal a forthright knowledge of what they are talking about in a welter of terminology more suitably associated with architecture, bridge-building, the navigation of sailing vessels, and the manufacture of steam pumps, it is quite clear that what appeals to our adolescent dramatists about Expressionism is the ease with which it may be negotiated. Of all the forms of dramaturgy that have been devised in modern times, Expressionism, together with its blood-brother, Impressionism, is the simplest superficially to master, and it hence

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naturally has a strong appeal for those young men who wish to become playwrights without knowing how to write plays. Expressionism is, in essence, simply the emotional skeleton of a play, the scenario. It presents the outline of drama, substituting mere close-ups of faces for a near view of character, and sudden, startling claps of thunder for the slowly gathering dramatic storm of human passion. The first essay that every schoolboy writes is full of italics; they are his means of a forceful expression that eludes his unpractised pen. In the same way, Expressionism is a convenient subterfuge for such talents as are unable to achieve the intricacies and profundities of dramatic writing. It is to dramatic strength of expression what cuss words are to an inarticulate man. . . . Unable, painstakingly, to unfold a drama in all its devious complexity and to tell a story in the more conventional and vastly more difficult manner, they resort to the new formula with avidity, since it offers them the very convenient and lazy means of getting an effect by telling the plot of a play theatrically without writing the play dramatically.”

Expressionism has failed to appeal to any but incompetent or neurotic minds, and we may leave it out of consideration except as a curiosity of dramatic literature which may some day furnish the historians of the theatre with material for a long footnote. Dramatic craftsmanship seems to me to have developed in a steady progression from the time of the Greeks, whose limitations are too often regarded, nowadays, as accomplishments. There was a hardness about the technique of the Greeks which held them down to a pattern and made their work incapable of spreading itself. The form was admirable, remembering the limitations of

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it, and it is a form which we must never forget in making our own plays, but it was imposed upon the Greeks by their mechanical poverty and a queer snobbery which, as Professor Baker points out, prevented them from attempting to improve the mechanical side of their theatre, in the belief that only menials and slaves would concern themselves with such things. Shakespeare's looseness of design was probably due as much to the rapidity with which he worked as it was to any theory he may have had about extending the range of the play. A careful craftsman, more intent on doing one play well than on producing two plays each year, would have tidied up his plays in a way that was impossible to Shakespeare, rushing at his work in a frantic hurry to get it done. Some of that itch to produce a large volume of work, irrespective of its quality, is to be observed in contemporary novelists who feel that they have been wasting time if they do not publish at least two books each year. But undoubtedly, whatever his motive was, Shakespeare made the mould more pliable, despite the fact that at times he seemed to be leaving it in pieces. From then onwards dramatists seem to have been combining two dissimilar processes—the rigid form of the Greeks and the loose form of the Elizabethans—and to-day they may claim, I think with truth, that they have brought the two forms into a new form. At the moment some trouble, due to finance, is making the use of this new form, wherein unity and variety are mingled, difficult, but that trouble

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will pass and the form will be freely employed. Any student of drama can observe for himself how much more easily a dramatist to-day makes his explanations in comparison, say, with Sheridan, who, as has already been stated, could not let his audience into his secrets without making one character tell another character things with which both of them were perfectly familiar. It is possible that movietones and broadcasting may completely revolutionize the drama, but it is more probable that they will merely alter the mechanics of it and leave the spiritual part much as it is.

## X X I I

SOME dramatists assert that an author should always prepare a scenario before he begins to write his play and rigidly adhere to it. Other authors say that a scenario is a cage, and assert that a play cannot grow, nor its characters come to life, unless the author leaves it and them some freedom of movement. My own belief is that expressed by the second group of dramatists. I have never written a scenario in my life. I once began to write one, but it bothered me so much that I did not finish it. It may be said of scenarios that those who like them should use them and those who dislike them should not. Every man must do his work in the way that he can. I have always believed and have always asserted that a dramatist should know his people so well that he is able to describe their lives before the opening of the play and their lives, if they do not die in the play, after it. I remember, in America, telling a group of young dramatists that an author ought to be able to describe the houses next door to the house in which his play is set; but I have heard Mr Shaw saying that he neither knew nor cared anything about the lives of his people before or after they appeared in his plays! Ibsen did not share Mr Shaw's indifference to his people. He knew exactly what kind of upbringing Nora, in *The* [118]

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*Doll's House*, had, and was able to tell a correspondent that she had been a spoiled child. The more one examines this matter, the less possible it appears that there should be any rule about it. Mr Henry Arthur Jones, who has written more than eighty plays, told me that, when he sends a play to a manager, it is completely ready to be performed. Not one word needs to be altered. Sir James Barrie, on the contrary, makes many alterations in his plays during rehearsal, not only in the dialogue but in the texture of the play itself. Mr Shaw refused to allow the Theatre Guild of New York to cut a single word out of *Heartbreak House*, but he made heavy "cuts" in it when Mr Bernard Fagan produced the play at the Court Theatre in London. Sir Arthur Pinero has sometimes entirely changed the end of a play—for example, *The Profligate*, which, in the first version, ended with the suicide of the chief man. The alteration made the end a happy one, and, despite my great respect for Sir Arthur, I feel that the second end, forced upon him by public opinion, was the right one.

It is sometimes said that an author should be familiar with the technicalities of stage-management, and an American lady, Mrs Isaacs, who edits the *Theatre Arts Monthly*, during a visit to England, informed an astounded reporter that the reason why women dramatists are so few in number and so inferior in skill to men dramatists is that they have not the opportunities which men possess of working

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"behind the scenes," shifting sets and, presumably, working limelights. I do not know of a single dramatist who has ever shifted a scene in his life, nor can I imagine of what service to him as a dramatist such an experience could be. When I write a play, I do not think of a theatre at all. To this day, although I have had control of one, I am almost completely ignorant of the technical business of the stage, and when people ask me questions about "battens" and "limes" and "flies," I have to ask them what these things are. I never can remember which is the O.P. side of the stage without doing a sort of sum in mental arithmetic. There is no reason why a dramatist should know about them any more than there is a reason why a novelist should know about the processes of printing. All that he need know is enough to prevent him from asking stage-managers to do impossible things. His common-sense ought to tell him that it is ridiculous to make an actor go off the stage in a lounge suit and return to it in ten or twenty seconds dressed in evening clothes! He ought not to divide an act into three scenes, each of which occupies the *whole* of the stage. These are matters where one requires not expert stage technical knowledge, but ordinary common-sense. When I wrote a play about farming people, I thought of a farm, and I tried to visualise the whole countryside in which that farm was situated, so that I knew not merely the names and characters of the people who came into the play, but also the names and some-

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thing of the characters of the people who were their neighbours but did not come into the play. I knew the name of the nearest market-town and the number of miles between it and the farm. I knew how many churches were in the district and what doctrines were preached in each of them, and I was able to tell the actors in America who took part in the play just what crops were growing in the fields outside the farmhouse. When a dramatist makes a character do or say a thing, he should ask himself whether it is consonant with the character's nature. He should also ask himself whether it is essential to the play. The test of value in a play is this, if a scene is taken out of it is there a gaping wound? Will the wound leave a perceptible scar? If the scene can be removed without a wound or scar, then it has no business to be in the play at all; it is mere padding, mere fat. Half the epigrams in Oscar Wilde's comedies are of the nature of things stuck on to a structure; they are not part of the structure—they have not grown out of it—and when they are removed one is unaware of the fact that they are not there. A play should be a living organism, so alive that when any part of it is cut off the body bleeds! . . . The apprentice dramatist should remember my definition of a bad dramatist as a man who goes into the theatre and never comes out of it again. A good dramatist is a man who constantly checks the creatures of his imagination with the creatures he discovers about him.

## X X I V

SOMETHING ought, perhaps, to be said about the way in which an author places a play. There is only one infallible method of persuading a manager to produce any play, and that is by paying for its production, and even that method is not infallible with managers who are jealous of the reputation of their houses. For the rest, the apprentice author must do what all of us who have had plays performed have to do, continue to send the manuscript to likely managers until one of them accepts it. The majority of authors employ agents, although all authors declare that agents are useless, and the author should take care not to sign any agreement until he has first submitted it to the Secretary of the Society of Authors, 11 Gower Street, London, W.C.1, or to the Secretary of the Dramatists' League, New York. The Society of Authors will propose ideal conditions to him, but he will have to remember that ideal conditions are seldom obtainable. He may more easily obtain them in the United States than in Great Britain, because the Dramatists' League, a powerful body, has drawn up a standard contract which it is able to force upon managers. It will be sufficient now to say that an author should

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never sell his play outright to anyone, nor part with any of his rights, until he has taken expert advice about it. He will do well to fix firmly in his mind this fact about dramatic authorship, that it is the hardest and most discouraging form of writing. Managers sometimes complain that there are no dramatists nowadays. They have themselves to blame for the fact, if it be a fact. Authors find the difficulties of obtaining performance for their work so great that they are turning their attention from the drama to other forms of writing. I can best illustrate these difficulties by examples taken from my own experience. In the year 1927 I wrote a long novel, *The Wayward Man*, and a three-act comedy, *The First Mrs Fraser*. I finished the novel in July and sent it to my publishers. In August I received the proofs. In October the book was published. A month later it was published in America. The play was sold in England and in New York, but at the time of writing (June 1928) it has not yet been performed, nor have I any idea when it will be performed. In America I am experiencing difficulty in casting the play, because the heroine is aged forty-eight and scarcely any actress is willing to play the part of a woman whose age exceeds forty. A well-known English actress has announced that her age, in the theatre, is thirty-eight, although it is now a long while since she was that age. No author must ever expect her to play the part of a woman whose years exceed that number. Difficulties

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of this kind do not affect the novelist, and we can scarcely wonder, then, that serious writers will not longer work for the theatre when they can more comfortably express themselves in other forms of writing. Another play of mine, *The Ship*, has been performed hundreds of times in Great Britain and in the United States by amateur players. Its "run" now exceeds that of seven out of ten "huge" West End successes, and it has been broadcast with notable success, yet I cannot persuade any commercial manager to produce it either in London or in New York. They fear that it will not be popular. The cost of production in the theatre is so heavy that no manager can afford to make an experiment or to take a risk, or so he asserts, although some of them manage to produce unspeakably silly plays which bring neither profit nor credit to them. In the first half of 1928 a great number of fatuous pieces were performed in the West End of London for "runs" that in many cases did not exceed a week. Infants in arms could have foretold their failure, but, seemingly, there are people who are prepared to "back" such pieces. Authors of quality have been driven away from the theatre by the harsh conditions in which the dramatist is expected to work, with the result that the English theatre is in grave danger of death. Those authors will not return to the theatre until they receive some reasonable guarantee that their work will not be in vain. Yet we need not despair. The desire for drama is deeply implanted in

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the human heart and cannot be destroyed. The theatre will flourish again, and the born dramatist, even although he receives no encouragement—receives, indeed, nothing but rebuffs—will continue to write plays; and, in due time, a theatre will be found for him. In this book I have tried to help the apprentice author, but no one is better aware than I am that all manuals are useless. No one can teach an author anything. He must teach himself. He is sometimes the worst judge of his own work. He has no more power to understand his people or to direct their lives with complete success than a parent has to understand the lives of his children and to direct them with complete success. He need not be greatly disturbed if they insist on going their own way. On the contrary, he should feel some elation at this sign of life in them. Docile characters may be dead characters. If an author does not, at some moment in the making of his play, feel his people straining to escape from his control, then he may feel certain that they are too servile to be worth much, or that he has failed to breathe life into their nostrils. For the rest, there is no rule except the rule which the author makes for himself. We lay down laws, and they are broken by men who make new laws which, in their turn, are broken too. But somehow plays are written. There is little more than that to be said. It is not possible, by merely taking thought, to become a dramatist, but many people, without taking any thought at all, have become dramatists of dis-

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tinct. I end, then, as I began. No one can tell a man how to become a dramatist; but, if he has the instinct for drama in him, no one can prevent him from becoming a dramatist, even though hundreds howl that he is no dramatist, that he breaks the law, that he does not know the first thing about drama, that he is incoherent, long-winded, undramatic, unintelligent, too intellectual, and all that is wrong. He may have all the advantages that fortune can bestow upon him and remain totally unable to write a play. He may have all the handicaps that can be imposed upon a human being and write plays full of genius. There is no knowing. He must find his own feet: they cannot be found for him.



